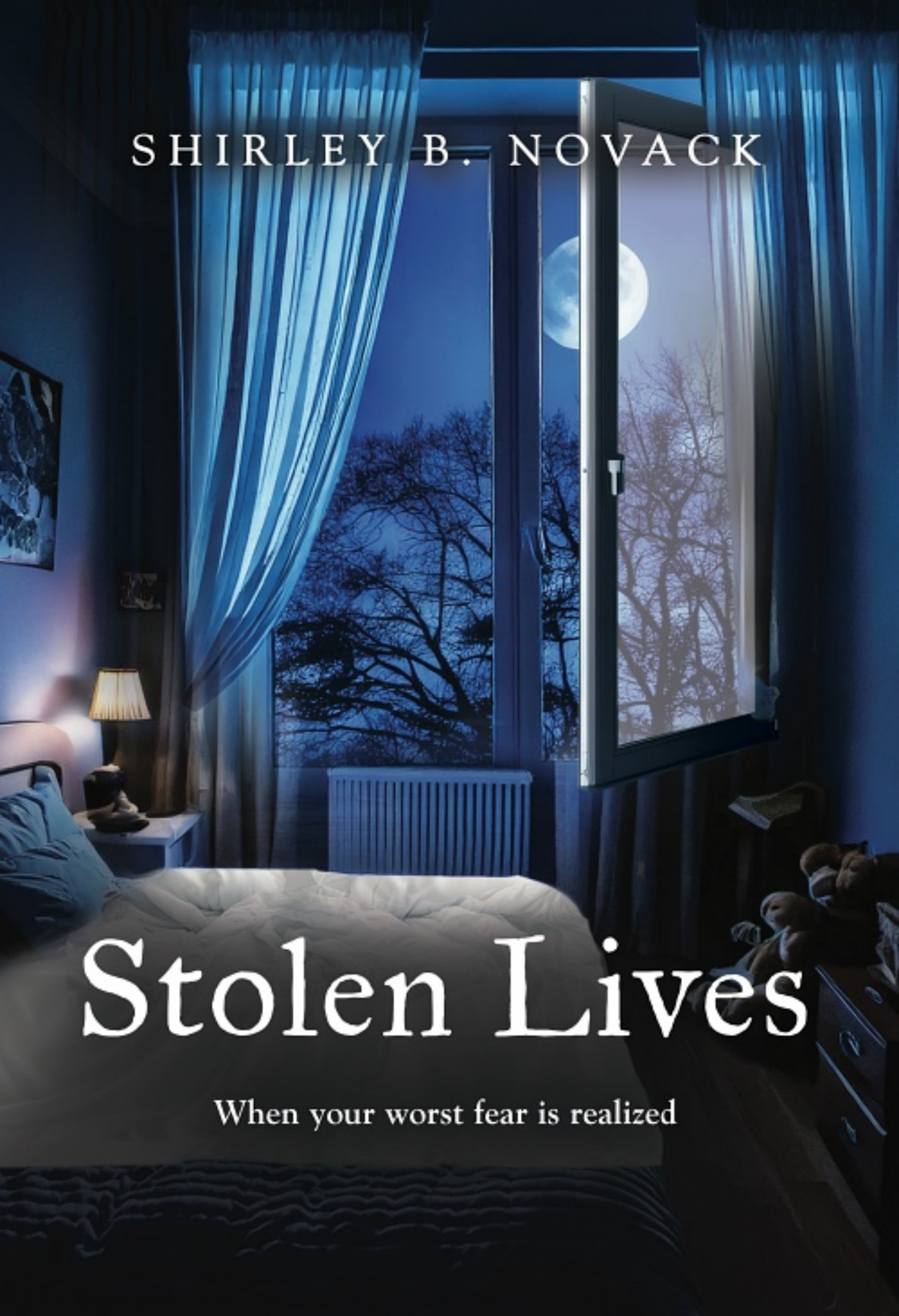


This story is based on human trafficking; a subject not thought of in many people's minds. Uncomfortable, yes, but also timely. My advice is to be aware; just be aware.

Stolen Lives
By Shirley B Novack

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A photograph of a bedroom at night. A large window with sheer curtains is open, revealing a full moon and the silhouettes of bare trees outside. The room is dimly lit, with a lamp on a bedside table to the left and a radiator visible under the window. The overall mood is mysterious and suspenseful.

SHIRLEY B. NOVACK

Stolen Lives

When your worst fear is realized

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PROLOGUE

“Mommy, Mommy, Mommy, I can’t see.” This was Allison’s first thought as she woke up in total darkness. “Hush, dear, you’re not blind; you have a blindfold on. This was a voice that was not recognized. The voice came from across the room and certainly was not her mother’s. As she lifted her hand to remove this snug binding from around her eyes, a hand covered hers, and in a menacing voice, said, “I wouldn’t do that if I were you. It is for your own protection that you keep it on.” It was a man’s voice that had quickly changed as a softer female voice took over. “Hello, Allison. You probably would like to go to the washroom to freshen up. After that, I’ll get something to eat and drink. You must be starving.”

Starving, Allison thought. How can I even think of food until I find out where I am, how I got here, and who these people are? Her last memory was being jolted out of a sound sleep with a hand over her mouth. No, it was a damp cloth with a powerful odor.

“Who are you people, and why can’t I go home?” “In due time, my dear, in due time.”

CHAPTER 1

WHERE IS ALLISON?

It began like any other Sunday morning. The boys were playing outside while Allison slept in like any other fourteen-year-old. Still, it was nearing noon, and neither Allison nor her shadow puppy, Bella, had been heard from. It was not unusual for Allison to sleep in on a weekend morning, just like most teenagers, but she always left her door part-way open in case Bella had to go out. Still, no sound from Bella yet either. For some reason, this concerned Sarah.

“Allison, Allison, time to wake up. I’m making your favorite pancakes.” Still, no response. Sarah turned off the burners and made her way upstairs. “Bella, Allison, time to seize the day.” Sarah made her way down the hall to see that Allison’s bedroom door was tightly shut. This was also unusual. Sarah’s heart, beating a mile a minute, gingerly turned the knob and gasped at the sight before her. Allison’s comforter was gone, her window was wide open, and Bella’s bed was empty, but there was no Allison. Sarah quickly ran from room to room, examining each crevice and corner, screaming Allison’s name. Bathrooms were all empty; boys’ rooms were the same. Sarah made her way to the basement, hoping to find some clue as to Allison’s whereabouts.

By now, Sarah was bordering on hysteria and called her husband, Levi, who purportedly was at his office; at least, this was where he told her he was going. Sarah, however, had her suspicions. She let the phone ring and ring until, finally, the answering service picked up. “I’m sorry, everyone is gone for the weekend. Would you like to leave a message?”

“I think I’m in the twilight zone,” Sarah thought to herself. Where is Levi?

Levi had been acting strange lately. When questioned, he would smile and shrug it off. “Just some tension at work. It’ll blow over.” To date, she still wasn’t sure what work was comprised of. Levi had an office that was staffed. It was called LK and Associates, but she still wasn’t quite sure what LK and Associates was. All Levi ever told her was that it was an enterprise that dabbled in investments. It all hinged on the economy and was buried in numbers and grafts, and not to worry her little head about it. Sarah had everything in life she could possibly want, so she was grateful for not having to think about where the money came from. She considered herself a lucky housewife who could stay home, play tennis with her friends, and be on several

volunteer committees. She loved being a mother, so why upset the apple cart? Her days were full. It never occurred to her to question anything.

She had met Levi when he came into her classroom to pick up his niece. She was immediately smitten with his good looks and easy smile. All she ever really knew of him was that his parents had come to this country from Argentina, and he was a first-generation American. He had gone to college for business but left before graduation to work for a start-up company in the finance division. He had done quite well financially and was able to start his own spin-off company by the time he was twenty years old. Sarah was immediately drawn to his air of self-confidence. They were married within the year and settled into a seemingly happy marriage.

Soon, the first child, Allison, arrived, and Sarah was over the moon to have a little girl to dress up in bows and frills. She was also thrilled to be able to quit her teaching job and stay home and be a mother and wife.

So it was, on this Sunday morning, when Levi announced that he had work to catch up on in the office, Sarah had no reason to question it.

When Sarah couldn't get in touch with Levi, she picked up the phone and called her big brother, Steven, who was a well-known defense attorney in Boston. "Steven, she shrieked into the receiver; Sarah is missing. Her bedroom is disheveled, and her window is wide open. On top of that, Bella is also gone. What should I do?"

"I'll be right over. Call the police immediately. On second thought, don't do anything until I get there."

It was known that Levi had gotten himself involved with some very shady individuals. He owed a lot of money to several loan sharks due to his heavy gambling addiction. Sarah was aware that he gambled, probably too much, but unknown to her, he owed thousands and thousands of dollars to some people who did not appreciate being crossed. The possibility that this had something to do with Allison's disappearance did not escape Steven's mind. Sarah had no idea about the extent of Levi's debt. She never knew how often Steven and her brother, Ben, had bailed Levi out. It would now be up to Steven to explain the facts to her. More than likely, these people had Allison, and a ransom demand would ultimately come in. Hopefully, she would not be harmed.

On the other hand, could it be possible that Allison had run away? That would be a long shot. Steven would scour her room for any evidence to the contrary. She was a good kid who did great in school, always obeyed curfews, and never got in trouble. Allison was every parent's dream of what a perfect child should be. Of course, she had lots of friends and was very popular, but never, in anyone's imagination, would she be

considered a runaway. She was totally devoted to her family. Not many kids her age loved going on trips with their parents. Her favorite was when she and her brothers went camping or on long drives with their parents.

By the time Steven arrived at Sarah's home, Sarah was in tough shape. "Why would you not allow me to call the police?" As a criminal defense attorney, he was familiar with the ways a person of questionable character thought or would behave. He did not put it past someone to kidnap Allison to get the money Levi owed them. Steven was hopeful that Allison was safe and unharmed.

"Sarah, I need you to go through Allison's bedroom with me and point out anything that seems out of place. It is most important that you try to stay calm and alert. Even the smallest detail can be a clue as to where she is. I know you are aware of Levi's gambling habits, and it is not inconceivable that her disappearance is related to that. We must determine if she went willingly or was taken." The thought that Allison could have been kidnapped sent shock waves through Sarah's body. She all but collapsed at the mere thought of that as a possibility.

Little by little and inch by inch, they scoured Allison's bedroom, looking for a clue. Why didn't Bella bark if someone entered her bedroom? Bella was a yapper and would certainly not stay quiet if she thought Allison was in danger.

"Steven, Sarah whispered, as though her whisper would make this all disappear. Her voice quivered and then halted. "Steven, here, under the bed. There is a dog chew we've never given Bella before." As Steven examined the chew, he recognized the odor of what seemed to have a chemical smell to it. He was now convinced, more than ever, that the tainted dog treat was thrown through the window first to sedate the dog. If so, why would they have taken Bella as well? There was no reason to bring her along if she was already quieted unless they also drugged Allison. A little ether poured on a cloth and placed over a sleeping person's mouth would debilitate her before she knew what hit her. Perhaps, he thought, if both Bella and Allison were missing, the thought that she ran away would hit them as a possibility. That would give them time. They obviously did not know what kind of teenager Allison was.

"Listen to me, Sarah. I have a feeling that this all has to do with Levi's gambling debts. These people will stop at nothing to get back what they think is theirs. I know the type. Unfortunately, I have represented some of these people, and if I'm right, you should be hearing from them soon. In the meantime, we have to locate Levi. We can hold off on letting Ben in on what is happening right now. He cannot do much; also, Mom and Dad cannot know. This will kill them. Hopefully, Allison will be returned unharmed before they will even know she's been missing."

Steven picked up the phone to call Julia, his wife, and noticed how pale Sarah was, trembling from head to toe. The fear of anything happening to her daughter was draining her of color. He quickly put the phone down, thinking she was going to pass out. "Listen, I'm pouring you a drink and need you to sit down and try to relax. I'm calling Julia to come pick up the boys. First and foremost, we have to find Levi."

Sarah, having no other choice, obeyed. She knew Steven was only trying to keep her calm. She never realized how wonderful he was. As kids, all they did was fight, along with Ben. She was the bratty sister, not that the boys got along any better. As they grew up and had families of their own, they grew as close as siblings could be. At that moment, she was grateful that he was there with her.

A short time later, after Julia had come to get the boys, Steven realized that Levi's unavailability might have something to do with Allison's disappearance. Levi loved his daughter beyond reason and would never intentionally put her in harm's way, but maybe he was with her. No matter what, they had to find Levi first to find Allison.

CHAPTER 2

A FRIGHTENED CHILD

Allison felt better after using the facilities and throwing cold water on her face. She was a smart kid and made herself aware of her surroundings. She also tried to memorize every inflection in this woman's voice. "I'm sure you'd like something to eat and drink by now. Let's get you settled, and I'll help you."

"Please tell me how my parents are. They must realize by now that I am gone." The woman placed a cold glass of milk in Allison's hand, followed by a sandwich. The milk never tasted so good. She took one bite of the sandwich and nearly gagged. Her stomach was turning over, and she rejected any effort to accept food.

"Please, she begged, let me call my parents to let them know I'm all right. They must be sick with worry by now."

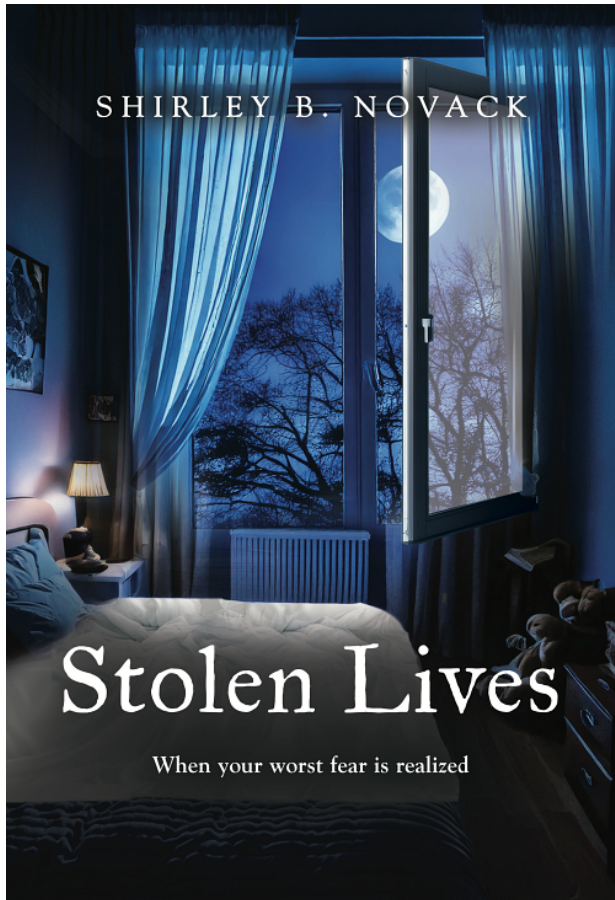
"In due time. In due time." This was not the response Allison wanted. She was totally confused. What took place to put her in this situation? "Please, she begged, let me go home. I won't tell anyone." In actuality, there was nothing to tell. She had no idea what these people looked like or where she was being kept. It had to stay that way for her own safety. The rest of that day seemed to drag on forever for Allison. She couldn't help but worry for her parents as well. How will they find her? What do these people want with her? She was screaming from the depths of her being. "Please, to no one, let this nightmare end. I want to go home."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Shirley B Novack is a first-generation daughter of Polish and Russian immigrants. She originally graduated from Fisher College in Boston with a degree in Laboratory Science. She then went on as a research assistant in Fetal Immunology at Boston Medical Center. After marrying and having three children, Shirley went back to school and graduated from Newbury College with a degree in Interior Design. She has had a successful interior design practice since 1985, but her passion for writing has never been far from the surface.

Shirley resides in Framingham, Massachusetts with her husband, Barry, and their precious Havanese, Stevie Nicks.



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