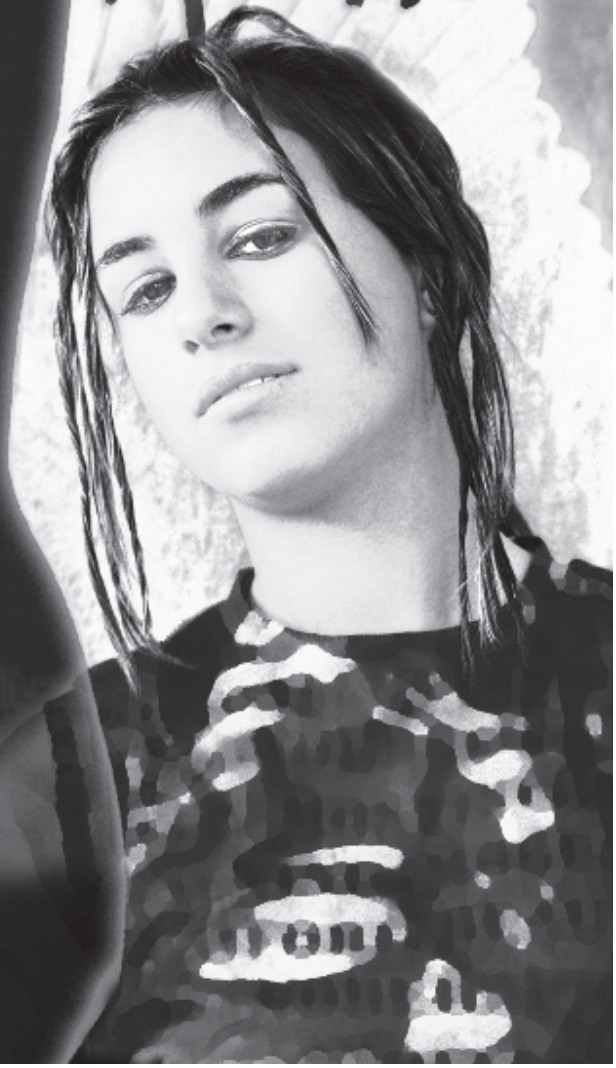
CHERYL PORTER

NOT Alone

Battling the Devil in the City of Angels



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To my children,

Lisa and Devin

For their **unconditional love**

and **support,**

and for

cheering me on when

I needed it most.

Contents

Chapter 1

Dark Roots

"Remember, Kellie, have dinner ready by 6:00," Mom called over her shoulder. "You know how cranky Dad gets when it's late. I'll be home to eat with you."

Mom was leaving for her job at the community college. Eleven-year-old Kellie pushed long strands of light-brown hair from her hazel eyes and watched Mom drive away in her station wagon. Dad was already at work, up at the nuclear rocket-testing site. Her 16-year-old brother, Tommy, was still in bed.

Kellie swallowed the last bite of cereal and went to her room to read. Somewhere in the house the air-conditioner kicked on, promising another long, hot summer day.

Hours later she ditched the book on ghost sightings and haunted houses to wander through their large

ranch-style Los Angeles home. Tommy had slept late and then left with friends. Feeling abandoned, Kellie wondered how she could fill the empty hours.

In the kitchen she poured ice water and remembered with longing the yam tarts their maid, Maria, used to make for her. That was before her parents' purchase of a new custom-built, white-and-gold camper van. That meant the maid had to go. Now Kellie made dinner during the week *and* cleaned the swimming pool, pulled weeds, made beds, and straightened her room. Tommy worked too, doing dishes, cleaning house, and mowing the lawn. On weekends they both helped Dad with bigger projects. She often wondered what just being a kid—with a mom at home and fewer chores—would feel like.

She flipped on the television, but nothing good was on. Besides, the den felt creepy with its collection of foreign statues, especially the one with too many hands.

Moving on, she ambled to the living room to look at books and photo albums. She enjoyed both, but disliked that room more than the den. Above the couch hung a large painting of what Tommy called a pinup girl, her smile prideful, eyes mean. There were other paintings from her parents' travels that bothered her too, including jungle scenes with people doing embarrassing things, but none were as yucky as the pinup girl.

Ignoring the painting, she took a photo album back to her room. Maybe studying her ancestors would pass the time. As she turned the pages, her

guinea pigs, Fred and Harriet, played in their cage, running in circles, squeaking.

"Harriet, calm down," Kellie laughed. The brown rodent stopped short, nose twitching, whiskers quivering. Then she sneezed from the dust they'd made and started eating.

Bored, Kellie closed the album and looked critically around the room. It was decorated with toy horses, her mom's porcelain geisha doll, a fat Buddha, a farm mural she'd helped her dad paint on two walls, and orange-flowered curtains chosen and put up while Kellie was away having her tonsils out. The room wasn't ugly. It just didn't look much like a girl's room. Not that it mattered. The prettiest girl's room ever wouldn't take away the bored frustration, the sense that her constant aloneness meant she was completely unimportant.

Grabbing the house key, she decided to escape on her bike for a while.

Next door, Mrs. Mills looked beautiful as she busily watered her petunias. Younger than Kellie's mom and very stylish, Mrs. Mills' fancy hairstyle and clothes were her trademark.

"Morning, Kellie," she called out.

Kellie waved before taking off down the street, first pretending the bike was a speeding car, then a galloping horse on the trail. It was fun . . . but not enough.

What she needed was a friend, but the girls from school didn't seem to like her much anymore. It could be her shyness, but Kellie thought it was more likely her hair and clothes that were all wrong. When

she was little, her older sister, Ellen, had fixed her hair. But then Ellen had moved away, and Kellie was just no good at doing her own.

Biting her lip, she focused now on whom she could play with. Her mind turned to Beth . . . she'd been nice to Kellie all through sixth grade. Turning the bike sharply, she pedaled hard toward Beth's house.

Once there, she rode in circles, stalling. *What if she already has a friend over?* she worried. Part of her wanted to run home. But then she remembered the emptiness, and courageously rang the doorbell.

Beth's mom answered, smiling and wiping floury hands on a blue apron.

"She's in her room," she said, pointing down the hall. "Go on back. I'll bring you girls a snack."

Kellie stepped inside. The house smelled of baking cookies. Shuffling down the hall, she stopped at Beth's door and knocked. Hearing nothing, she called, "Beth, it's Kellie. May I come in?"

She heard movement before the door flew open.

"Hi!" Beth exclaimed, amber eyes blinking. Her dark-brown hair was combed back in a ponytail, every hair in place, and tied with a white ribbon. "I didn't know you were coming! Here, sit down. I'm doing my favorite puzzle. See, it has horses and a red barn."

She made space on the floor while Kellie looked around in awe. The room had rose-patterned wallpaper, ruffled white curtains, and a white four-poster bed covered with a pink bedspread, dolls, and stuffed animals. It was beautiful.

"Your mom's bringing food," Kellie offered.