

# Elijah's Story:

A Story of Human  
Trafficking  
Prevention





## Directions:

1. Print out the book or work on a separate piece of paper
2. At the end of every few pages there will fill in the blank words, plus a fun word search at the end of the book.
3. Feel free to doodle or decorate the book pages as you read

Before Kira started skipping class, ruining her otherwise impeccable record, and ignoring me, I was intent on asking her to Prom. We were friends ever since she invited me over to her high rise downtown to work on an English project. The invitations kept coming even after we turned in that well-crafted final paper. Ms. Sanders, the school counselor, personally congratulated us on the assignment, saying we made a good team. Maybe Kira thought so, too, because the rougher things got at home for me, the more time I spent in her room, the walls of which were adorned with magazine cutouts of models. She had Kate Moss and Gigi Hadid taped up like icons, their pale skin and narrow noses demanding Kira's worship. Maybe she thought if she stared at them long enough, their flawlessness might be contagious. The fact that she was one of the only black girls at school set her apart, intensifying her self-loathing and feelings of isolation. But to me it made her more attractive. As a kid with an absent dad and mom who was trapped in prostitution and drug addiction, I could understand her loneliness. We were from opposite worlds but shared a common insecurity.





# Hey Readers!

Can you answer these two fill in the blanks about Elijah and Kira? Be sure to check for the answers near the end of the book.

**What might make Elijah, the narrator, more vulnerable to trafficking?**

H O M \_ \_ L \_ \_ E

HINT: Elijah's dad is absent and his Mom is trapped in prostitution. Traffickers could prey on his need to feel loved and supported. Most kids get that from their parents but Elijah does not.

**What about Kira? What makes her vulnerable?**

I \_ O \_ \_ I \_ O N

HINT: Kira is different from the girls at school and in her community. Traffickers can try to give her a fake feeling of belonging.

Different worlds, I mean, in terms of socio-economic class. She was rich. I remember our first obligatory hang out. As she led me upstairs past staged family pictures, she complained. With anyone else, the dismay she expressed would send my eyes rolling back in my head, given that beneath my feet was a marble staircase and at the top of that staircase was an immaculately clean bedroom, the floors of which she certainly did not clean herself. Even though the person sweeping her penthouse and making her bed was probably someone from my neighborhood, I liked her. Even though the downtown homeless population outside her building frequented the same shelter I moved into after Mom overdosed, I liked her. And because I hoped to do the classic--although juvenile--thing, conquering my nerves of over a year and asking her to Prom, I tended to excuse her pettiness. With her, I validated concerns I usually dismissed as first world problems. She was, after all, like me: in limbo. While my limbo stretched between the homeless shelter and my yard sale doormat, her limbo was between her dark beautiful skin and wanting to fit in with the girls at school.





Kira said I didn't have to stand there looking so awkward, that I could sit down. So even though it felt like an overstep of boundaries--I was, after all, there for school--I sat down on her bed, with its sheets folded like origami. She went downstairs to get cookies, gluten free, because her Mom insisted. Her Mom said that such a diet yielded a good physique. *"It's so dumb,"* Kira told me later that evening, ranting about her parents' psychotic expectations.



Those expectations kept her up at night pouring over homework and SAT practice tests. She told me that if she couldn't ace this test, nothing is left for her to feel good about. All she had was her intellect. And looks, but of course she didn't think so.

*"That's your logic, seriously?"* I said.

*"Yes, Elijah. Don't you get it?"*

It was no secret that her parents were the only black couple living in a penthouse downtown. People said they were the literal embodiment of the American dream. Kira sacrificed all her free time to study, because her parents demanded nothing less than a continuation of their impressive success.



They said so in sticky notes on the kitchen table, the family's primary form of communication.

*'Don't forget your appointment with the SAT tutor at 4, or we put some extra allowance on your card because of how well your transcript came out, sweetie.'*

Neither of them were home often, busy either at work or some gala, where their faces were always the darkest but their jewelry always the flashiest. Physically and emotionally absent, Kira saw herself for what she felt they used her as: a tool with brains to show off to their white friends as a token of success.





# Hey Readers!

Can you answer these two fill in the blanks about Elijah and Kira? Be sure to check for the answers near the end of the book.

**Pressure from Kira's parents makes her feel I N           C      R  
E.**

HINT: This feeling of not being good enough for her parents makes her emotionally vulnerable.

**Kira experiences a lack of S U      P      I from her parents.**

HINT: Kira does not have a trusted adult who respects her who she could talk to in an unsafe situation.

During lunch, she shrugs her shoulders over chemistry homework and in class, she takes notes furiously. One time, she got a B. She was mute the whole rest of the day. But that silence was a blip in her character, her character that never sacrificed humor, even if self-deprecating jokes were the only laughs left. This silence was a temporary change, I first thought. But as the monotony continued, the invitations to her house stopped as well. It was then that she replaced her company with a silence that gave me reason to worry.



As Prom approached, Kira's invitations became fewer and farther between.  
*"Elijah, I'm busy tonight. Sorry."*

Her excuses were consistently vague. She avoided my questions about her whereabouts.

*"I'm just with my boyfriend,"* she said.

And so I gave up, well I tried to.. But the more hours of school and sports she missed, the more time I spent wondering where she was. Tardiness was never a characteristic of Kira's. Her attendance record was impeccable until those last few months of junior year, until she started hanging out with this new boyfriend.



Weeks before Prom, Kira cut me off entirely. She pretended not to notice when I nodded at her between classes; she didn't give me excuses anymore but rather ignored me. When I watched her at lunch, her shoulders were hunched as they always were, not over homework, but over her phone. The cafeteria jello we used to love was left on the untouched plate of food in front of her. Her eyeshadow was muddy and smudged around her tired eyes. One time, I saw her counting bills discreetly, trying to conceal her hands. That's when I knew something was up.



Snooping was in my nature; after years of scavenging in my meth-addicted mother's bathroom cabinet, it became a habit. I had later learned that my mother's addiction kept her as a victim of sex trafficking. She never told me herself, but one of my neighbors had witnessed men coming in our house with cash and leaving hours later. My neighbor reported Mom to the National Trafficking Hotline, but since she is an adult, not much could happen. Kira on the other hand was a minor who had the same skittish ticks, the same wads of cash, and the same heavy eye bags that I had noticed with my Mom. I couldn't save Mom, but maybe I could save Kira. So one day after school I followed her home, with my steps far enough behind her to remain incognito. But she didn't turn left like normal to go to her house. She waited in an auto repair parking lot behind school until a red Convertible crawled to a stop and she crouched inside.



I didn't just want a date to Prom--it was Kira's safety I was concerned about. When I asked her about the car and the figure in the driver's seat, she replied, "*Elijah, stop texting me. It's my boyfriend, and he's right--it's weird if I'm hanging out with other guys, okay?*"

But as designer brands took over her closet and an exhausted scowl clouded her expression, I couldn't help but wonder about this boyfriend. This boyfriend who didn't go to our school, this boyfriend with a nice car who never showed his face, who dropped her off late to school and told her she couldn't hang out with me. Who, I suspected, gave her what I couldn't: enough cash to buy designer brands for her to feel good about herself and enough phony promises to make her feel loved.



When I think about how my Mom was trafficked, it was the cash that really kept her trapped. She needed it to feed us, to survive. Our poverty and her addiction kept her on a leash. After sending me into the local shelter with a sandwich and a side hug, I would stay up at night wondering what to do. I never came up with anything to help--Mom was in deep. But Kira was still treading in shallow water. It wasn't too late. I could save her. She had a stocked pantry and a million dollar roof over her head. She didn't need the money. So why hasn't she escaped what I suspected was trafficking, disguised as a thriving, reciprocated romance?





# Hey Readers!

Can you answer these two fill in the blanks about Elijah and Kira? Be sure to check for the answers near the end of the book.

## **What need does Kira feel her “boyfriend” is fulfilling?**

L \_ \_ E and C \_ N E \_ D \_ N \_ E

HINT: These are feelings that every person needs for self-esteem. Kira does not feel this in her own life so turns to her “boyfriend” to try and feel these needs.

## **What kept Elijah’s Mom in trafficking aka ‘the life’?**

The need for an I \_ C \_ M E and her A \_ D \_ C \_ \_ O N

HINT: The trafficker used these things to control Elijah’s Mom. She could not get them anywhere else so she could not leave.

Kira's denial was the only obstacle. It was infectious--her indifference nearly convinced me that nothing was wrong.

*"Kira, I know what trafficking looks like. I'm worried about you "*

*"Elijah, don't be ridiculous. He's just a boyfriend and he treats me like a queen."*

Her fatigue, her absence, and her hasty withdrawal indicated that *that* wasn't true. The situation was too familiar for me to ignore it. I had to interfere, even if it meant obliterating any possibility that she would go to Prom with me. My intervention would anger her but it would save her.



I enlisted the help of Ms. Sanders, our counselor. After school, when Kira had already rushed out in her routine manner, I sat down in her office and told Ms. Sanders what I saw. I told her the red flags--Kira's absence, the money she kept, and her mysterious 'boyfriend.' Ms. Sanders' furrowing brow confirmed my anxiety. I knew she would do something. I had done what I had to do. The situation was out of my hands. To say the least, it would be a relief if the boyfriend really was just a sweetheart from another high school, clingy but young and innocent.



But I knew her boyfriend was not another high school sweetheart. I knew because the following day, Ms. Sanders poked her head in our English class and asked for a “*Kira Thompson, please.*”

Kira did not come back that period, and in passing, I saw through Ms. Sanders’ office window, two men in uniform. I knew it could be unsafe for Kira to tell the truth, but I was hoping with the police and Ms. Sanders there, she felt safe enough to be honest. So instead of politely avoiding the truth with terse responses and tight grins, she reluctantly spoke. Weeks later, the school organized seminars, information sessions and parent coffees titled, “*Stay safe from trafficking.*” Or “*Don’t let your child become a victim.*” And why else would the school board speak up unless Kira had ended her silence first? I never told her, but I was proud of her.



What she revealed with apprehension behind Ms. Sanders' closed door, I can only guess the specifics. All I know is relief because that red convertible stopped coming around and she was present at school every single day. And when I asked her to Prom, I was right--she said no. But she went with a group of girls and was laughing and that was enough. For once, she looked like she was happy.. Her smile, in a minor way, made me feel like I had done something for my Mom. I can only presume Mom is being trafficked right now. And her situation is sadly out of my hands, but Kira's was not. I cannot save Mom but I know I helped Kira. If Mom ever survives her situation, I know she will be proud of me. It is not easy to leave trafficking, aka 'The Life' and I am glad Kira could do so safely.



## HEY READERS,

Here are the answers to the fill in the blanks throughout the story. How many did you get? Do you understand why? Check out the cross-word on the new page for a better understanding!

1. HOME LIFE
2. ISOLATION
3. SOCIO-ECONOMIC STATUS
4. INSECURE
5. SUPPORT
6. LOVE and CONFIDENCE
7. INCOME and ADDICTION

## HEY READERS,

We have a cross-word about Kira and Elijah's life. There are hints for each word. Can you fill out the whole search? The hints are below and the cross-word is on the next page followed by the answers.

### **Across**

1. When Kira met her traffickers, Elijah noticed her \_\_\_\_\_ from school.
4. Elijah's Mom was vulnerable to trafficking because she needed money and \_\_\_\_\_ to survive.
6. Something a victim might tell to keep people when asked about their whereabouts.
7. Elijah enlisted the help of an adult, \_\_\_ an asset to help Kira.
8. People who feel \_\_\_\_\_ might think a trafficker could fill that need through false promises of love.
11. Traffickers \_\_\_ victims to Johns.
12. Kira acted \_\_\_\_\_ with her money at school.
13. Traffickers have \_\_\_\_\_ over victims' decisions.

### **Down**

2. A factor that made Elijah at a higher risk of trafficking
3. A common feeling that makes someone vulnerable to grooming.
5. Elijah talked to Ms. Sanders because she is a trusted \_\_\_\_\_
6. It is important not to \_\_\_\_\_ victim to false promises.
9. What Kira experiences as a minority in her school.
10. A need Kira thought her trafficker was giving her.





