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Episode 167: 48 Hours, Part 1

Air Date: June 18, 2021

Phoebe Judge: This episode contains descriptions of violence and sexual assault. Please use discretion.

In June of 2014, a woman named Denise Huskins moved to Northern California. She was a physical therapist and had decided to do her residency at Kaiser Hospital in Vallejo, not far from San Francisco. During the first month she was there, she started noticing another physical therapist who worked at the hospital. His name was Aaron Quinn.

Denise Huskins: And we always would gravitate to each other and have these really easy conversations. [music comes in] And at the end of July, he said that he was interested in hanging out with me a little bit more. And he let me know what was going on in his life. He had recently broken up with his ex-fiancé because of her infidelity. So he wasn't necessarily in the best position to start dating. But our connection was

undeniable. I mean, I think two weeks in, we were just supposed to go to the baseball game [chuckles] and we're sitting in the parking lot talking instead ... and we had said, you know, it feels like we've known each other our whole lives.

Aaron Quinn: The conversations are just so easy. There was a warmth and empathy and honesty about her.

Denise: And so, we gave it a shot and we quickly fell in love.

Phoebe: After they had been dating for about seven months, Denise learned that Aaron had been in communication with his ex-fiancé. She knew that he'd struggled to get over the end of that relationship and to deal with being cheated on. But by this point, Denise needed him to make a decision about what he wanted.

Aaron: Our relationship came to a head when she found out I was still texting my ex-fiancé. And from there, Denise rightfully demanded the change. And so I actually thought I had ruined things with Denise. But I needed to make changes for myself if I was ever gonna find someone like her ... I was hoping that we could still work out things together.

Phoebe: Aaron and Denise planned to meet to talk about what they should do about their relationship. They decided to meet at Aaron's house, which was on a peninsula called Mare Island in Vallejo.

Denise: I wasn't quite sure where the conversation was gonna to go. And if this was gonna be us moving forward as committing to each other, or if this was going to be the end.

Aaron: It was an emotional talk. But it was actually a new beginning. [music fades out]

Denise: And so, although it was a long emotional evening, we were in a good place. And we fell asleep around midnight. And we're in a really deep sleep. I think it was around 3:00 a.m.— and that's when I heard a strange man's voice waking me from sleep. [music comes in]

At first, I thought it was a nightmare. I guess I hoped it was a nightmare, but I couldn't deny it any longer. And my eyes shot open, and I froze in fear ... seeing a flashing white light against the wall, and red laser dots scanning the walls, and then disappearing as it went over our bodies. The man who spoke said, 'This is a robbery. We are not here to hurt you.' And so, when I first realized the situation, I froze and there was nothing to really do 'cause I didn't know— I mean, when you're awoken to a situation like that, you can't even imagine it. You only hear about it in movies, and maybe about news reports. But you don't think it's ever gonna happen to you. So, just thinking that the best thing for

us to do is listen. And that's the thing, they woke us up saying it's a robbery. And so you're hoping that that's actually true.

Aaron: My eyes popped open. I was staring at the ceiling. I could see the white light flooding the room ... and the red laser dots crossing over that I assumed were sights to a gun. But my body froze ... and I could hear the voice saying something, but I just couldn't move ... until he finally said, 'Aaron lie face down.' They knew my name. And that broke me out of that frozen moment. So I rolled onto my stomach. [music fades out]

Denise: It was just— I mean, the fact that they knew Aaron's name made me wonder what they were really here for. [music comes in]

Phoebe: I'm Phoebe Judge. This is Criminal.

Denise: The man who spoke, he then instructed me to tie Aaron up. He put zip ties at the edge of the bed and quickly backed away. I reached behind to get those zip ties. I never looked back, afraid that we would be hurt if I did. As I was tying Aaron's hands together and his feet together, I couldn't see Aaron's eyes, but I saw him take a deep breath in and on his exhale out, he just said, 'Oh my God.'

And even though we couldn't speak to each other, I think there was this understanding that it was in our best interest to not fight and to comply considering the situation— the fact that they were armed and there was multiple people. I mean, this was really pretty quick. It was obvious how planned it was.

I was then instructed to go to the bedroom closet, keep my head down, do not look up. I did that, but as I passed the foot of the bed, I could see two people standing at the edge. They were dressed in all black. I saw from their feet to waist level, it looked like they were holding something at their waist. One of them followed behind me, and I was zip tied in the same way I tied up Aaron in the closet. And then Aaron was escorted to the closet too. And we were both given blacked out swim goggles and headphones over years to listen to these prerecorded messages with instruction. It was a really odd recording with wind chime-like music and this really auto-tuned voice saying, 'Be calm. This is not your fault.' And eventually said that they were gonna drug us. We were gonna take it orally, but if we refused, they would inject it. And so we did, and I was still somewhat hopeful that it was just a robbery, thought, *Okay, they'll knock us out. So we really— there is really no chance of us fighting back or trying to escape. And they'll clear out Aaron's belongings and eventually we'll wake up, but we'll be okay.* [music fades out] But each moment that passed, I just got worse and worse. The recordings eventually said that they were going to ask personal and financial questions, and they would ask me and Aaron. So I thought, *OK maybe they're going to wipe out our bank accounts.* But then they moved me to a different room and then they moved me downstairs, and they never asked me any personal questions or financial questions.

And eventually when I was downstairs, the voice that was speaking, he came down and he said, 'We have a problem. This wasn't meant for you. This was meant for...' And he named Aaron's ex-fiancé by her first and last name. He said, 'We need to figure out what to do.' And not long later, he came back in and said, 'This is what we're going to do: We're going to take you for 48 hours. We're going to put you in the trunk of Aaron's car, transfer you to another trunk, drive you hours away, and Aaron's going to have to complete some tasks for your release.' The man that we call "the voice" comes back, and he asks me do Denise and my ex look alike. And I just gave out this deep guttural sigh. I said, 'Yes, they both have long blonde hair.' And he said, 'We have the wrong intel.' This was meant for my ex. And we have to figure out what we're going to do next.' During that point there's another, probably twenty, thirty minutes of lack of interaction with him. And I hoped that maybe because it wasn't intended for Denise, that they would leave. Maybe they did leave. But eventually came back and told me that they're going to take Denise for 48 hours. I would have to pay money. I can get her back and we can move on with our lives.

[to Aaron]

Phoebe: How much money did he say you'd have to pay?

Aaron: So they knew I had at the time 20,000, my checking account. They demand 17,000 payments of 8,500 to avoid the mandated federal reporting limit. They ended up playing this like long, ten-minute recording for me that say that they're a black-market group that people get hired for personal or financial debts. And ... in turn, they were gonna make my home a prison. They were gonna put a mirroring app on my phone so they could see if I was calling or texting anyone. They were installing a camera, which required me to stay in my living room area until I was in— I left for the bank. They said I needed to follow their rules and stay in sight of the camera. I needed to always be available by my phone. If I didn't do that, they would hurt Denise. If I didn't do that, they would hurt my family. If I went to the police, they would kill Denise. [music comes in]

[to Denise]

Phoebe: Denise, when you heard that they were going to take you, what happened next? What was your first thought? What happened?

Denise: I think I was ... in shock and just felt deeply defeated. And defenseless. I thought, *Maybe I can hop to the door. Maybe I can scream. But we're separated now. Aaron's upstairs. So anything I do could provoke them to hurt him and I wouldn't be able to live with myself if I did anything that would cause him more harm.* So ... [sighs] I mean, my response to him was just, 'OK'. And from that point on, I just heard a lot of commotion going on in the house. I could hear the doors open to the driveway and someone moved my car to the front of the street and someone in the garage opening

and closing doors of Aaron's car. And just a lot of moving parts until he eventually said he was ready to put me in the trunk. And before he did, I asked to go to the bathroom and he allowed me privacy is how he put it, which was odd. There was many points along that night of the home invasion of this odd politeness ... when I was tying up Aaron, it was, 'You're doing a good job', you know, over and over again. And when he placed me on the couch, 'Are you comfortable?' he asks, and places the blanket over me 'cause I said it was cold. I mean, more or less handled me with care. So all of these things, even that prerecorded message with that music playing that you would describe as soothing, but in a situation of such extreme life-threatening ... tactics it was all the more chilling and disoriented, which obviously was by design. And because it was clear that all of this was by design, it just made it even more like, *Why? What is all of this? And what is their true motivation and their end game? And what really are they really in this for?*

Phoebe: And they had given you drugs ... they'd given you some cocktail of drugs that must've been making you kind of out of it— or ...? [music fades out]

Denise: I wasn't ... out of it in the fact that I— you know ... that fight or flight response where you're— you need to pay attention to every single thing. Your senses are on hyper-vigilant alert because anything, any bit of information can save your life. So there was this mix between— in my body of needing to stay hyper aware and hyper alert. And also, the effects of the set of motives were kicking in, in that I couldn't move quickly, or I wouldn't be able to react quickly, or do anything that physically.

Phoebe: And then he— what happened when— he just said, 'We're ready.' And carried you outside?

Denise: Mmhmm. And then he placed me in the trunk where he lined a comforter so it'd be more comfortable. And I had waited some time. And then, I actually, before he left, I asked if I could get the blanket from the couch 'cause I was shaking so much. And he said something like, 'Oh yeah, I forget how cold it is.'

'Cause we're all wearing wetsuits here.' I mean that statement for me ... I just was like, 'Wha— OK. I mean, I couldn't— for me, I couldn't make sense of it. Aaron— this voice said that to Aaron at a different spot, and Aaron actually thought that that made sense.'

Aaron: I assume they were wearing wetsuits to eliminate any hair from in my house or DNA. Also, Mare Island is part of the city of Vallejo, but it's actually a small island connected to it. And there's basically waterways to escape or a marsh. So, it to me showed that they had even thought about potential escape routes or how to limit any sort of tracking to them.

[to Aaron]

Phoebe: And when you came downstairs, what happened at that point when you were brought downstairs?

Aaron: When I came down, there was the camera that was mounted in my living room, made this electronic *dung* sound ... three times like, *dung ... dung ... dung*. I asked him if it'd be making that sound the entire time. And the voice told me that they weren't able to get into my router, so they were loading it through WIFI, and that the sound would stop in the morning. And then he instructed me to stay on the couch until the morning time, I would call in sick to work. I would use Denise's phone to text our manager that she had a family emergency and would be gone for the week. And that I would need to wait for further instruction. He left and I could hear my car in my driveway. And heard him say— heard the voice say to Denise, 'I'm gonna close the trunk now.' And I just heard Denise say, 'OK'.

And ... I was afraid that was the last time I was gonna hear her voice. [music comes in]

Denise: So he closed the trunk. And at first, I could feel that it was going to be really difficult to breathe as soon as he closed the trunk. And I was trying not to hyperventilate. I was trying to keep myself calm. And not long after we were driving, he stops the car, comes out, opens the trunk, puts his hand on me forcefully and says, 'Do not speak. Do not scream. You're gonna make this a lot harder on yourself.' And I pleaded, you know, I didn't say anything ... and so, that— it concerned me to really what might provoke him, even the slightest thing that I didn't do. And then we were driving maybe about twenty, thirty minutes. We stopped somewhere. He takes me from that trunk to another trunk. He had cut my hands free for this longer ride ... to make it more comfortable is what he said. And we drove for hours, and I was trying to pay attention to where we were turning and what was going on. But the effects of the sedatives are really starting to take over. And I was in and out of consciousness for the next several hours. But the car started slowing down and turning and eventually stopped.

And he said, 'We're here.' And tried pulling me out of the trunk and it was ... awkward. And so I kind of pushed to help him get me out of there. [music fades out] He awkwardly stumbles with me in his arms, falls and I dropped to the ground, he lands on top of me and he's frantic. And just ends up dragging me across the floor and I'm left on this cold concrete floor. And he says he needs to go inside to clean. And that's where I could hear him scrubbing. And I just kept picturing ... just the bloody remains of prior victims that he might be cleaning up just to prepare for his next victim. And you cycle through all the different horror films that you've gone through, and what— how extreme this could actually be. And wondering - *Is this what they really are motivated to do?* And they just said all that stuff just to keep me calm. And so right then and there, I told myself: *It doesn't matter what they do to me. I'm not gonna beg and scream. If that's what they want, if that's what they're in this for, I'm not going to give them that satisfaction. I'm just*

gonna— if I can, I'm just gonna stay as calm and quiet as possible. And he eventually comes back out and he cuts the zip ties off my feet and says he needs me to shower. And he again allows me privacy. He says because he doesn't want to dehumanize me anymore than he already has to. And he had to get the room ready. I mean, I was still blindfolded, and I was to knock when I was done. It was quicker than he anticipated. And so, he put me on a couch, and I could hear cardboard, duct tape, and eventually puts me in a bedroom and places me on a bed and says this is where I'll be staying. And he says he needs to leave for a little bit. There's someone else going to be watching over me while he's gone and it's in my best interest to not talk to this person. And I was— as soon as I heard that car leave, I passed out again from the sedatives that they gave. And I think some hours went by, and he said he was back and it was just going to be him. [music comes in]

[to Aaron]

Phoebe: And Aaron, you were back at your house, and you've been told, 'Whatever you do, don't tell anyone what's happened. And don't call 9-1-1.' Tell me about what you decided to do and what you needed to do.

Aaron: Yeah, so when the kidnappers had taken Denise, I was able to push the goggles off my eyes by using the armrest on my couch, and I saw a digital clock and it was exactly 5:00 a.m. And I tried to stay awake, but without the threats right there and the commotions, the sedatives took over. And eventually, I was able to wake up and stay awake. Around 11:30 I started receiving text messages and emails giving me instructions of the exact payments, and that Denise is being well taken care of. Eventually they tell me that I will need to drop the money off Tuesday night, and they will return Denise Wednesday morning. And during that time, the camera kept on making the *dung-dung-dung* sound. I was panicking trying to stay calm ... my mind spinning. But after I received the email that telling me to drop off the money and they would return to Denise at a different time, I realized that I can't trust these guys. If I show up with the money, they can take me as well and kill us both to get away with it. Because they had said they had put monitoring app on my phone, I believed 9-1-1 wasn't an option. But my brother is an FBI special agent. And so, I took the risk of calling him, thinking that he could alert the authorities and if the kidnappers did see my phone call, I would lie and say that my brother was going to come over. I reached my brother, he told me I needed to call 9-1-1 because we need the full force of law enforcement behind us. And I agreed with him, so I remember putting the numbers in, not hitting the call button yet ... and just really thinking that I could be killing Denise with this phone call... because the police would show up, I would be okay. But the kidnappers, if they see that I went to the authorities, they would kill her. That was the hardest decision I've ever made. And the police made everything worse. [music fades out]

[as narrator]

Phoebe: Aaron called 9-1-1 at 1:54 p.m.— almost eleven hours after he and Denise had been woken up by the intruders, and told the dispatcher that his girlfriend had been kidnapped. Two Vallejo police officers arrived at his house.

Aaron: They asked me if I was drugged. I said, ‘Yes.’ I told him that the kidnappers had drugged me. But they repeatedly kept asking me if I’d been partying ... multiple times. Even when they came into my living room, the camera made the dung sound when officers went over and immediately unplugged it without wearing gloves. Didn’t ask me anything about it. And they asked me to go down to the station to give a statement, which I agree. Then I sign for them to search my house. I told them anything they need to find Denise, I’ll do it. When I went down to the police station, two detectives take my initial statement. But during that time that they told me that they needed to take my clothes for evidence. So I agree, not knowing that they were going to have me stand up and take pictures with my arms spread. They’d take a picture of my front, my side, my back, and my other side. And then you’d take a piece of clothing off and you would repeat that all the way down to where I was naked. And they’re taking pictures of me. In turn they give me prison clothes to wear. It says, literally says “Solano County Prison” on the side. [inhales and exhales loudly] And then they take my statement, and they leave me alone for hours ... until another detective comes in, Detective Matt Mustard. And he asked me to go through the statement again. This point, I don’t know exactly what the time is because I’m in a small room without a window, with no clock, isolated from everyone. But I assumed it was around 7:30 because I could kind of tell the sun was going down when Mustard opened the door. They asked me to go through the statement again, even though I had told them everything. He’s not taking notes, he asked me more about my relationship with Denise than the actual kidnapping. Eventually he stops and goes, ‘The story you’re telling is extraordinary.’ I agreed with them. He said, ‘I don’t think that happened. Something bad happened. But they’re only one guy. It’s just you.’ And then he, for the next forty-five minutes or so, told me that I killed Denise. She was dead. He’s already accepted that, I need to accept it. And if I keep telling him this crazy story, they’ll paint me as a cold calculated monster. [music comes in]

[to Denise]

And Denise, what’s going on at this point in the house and the room that you’re in?

Denise: Yeah so, later ... sometime that maybe late afternoon or evening— well, he had come in to tell me a little bit more about the organization that he and his associates were involved in. So it was a black-market start-up company to be hired to fulfill these personal or financial debts. And they were hired specifically for Aaron and his ex, but he

got the wrong intel. If only he would have checked my person, seen my identification, then this never would have happened. I was like, *OK, what am I supposed to do with that information being here now?* And I had asked him too to stop telling me because I was afraid of anything more that I knew that it would put me at more risk, and it would be more likely that they would end up killing me. And he said that that wasn't the plan. And so, it was strange in the fact that he spent a lot of time talking to me and sharing things with me. And then it just felt like he was trying to force this rapport with me to get me to trust him. And I just kind of had to play along. And then a little bit later, he came back into the room to say, 'We have a problem.' And at first, I was just afraid that something happened to Aaron. But then he said, 'Because we didn't have any information on you, we have nothing to use against you. And so, one of us is going to have to have sex with you. We're going to record it. And so that way, if we think that you're ever gonna go to the police, we will use it, and put it on the internet.' [music fades out] And ... [hesitates and then, sighs] he leaves a little bit to say— to figure out exactly how we're going to do this, and then comes back and says, 'Can I lay down with you and talk with you a little bit?' And he starts telling me about how he's had psychological difficulties. He was in the military and has PTSD. And I sat there and listened to make it seem like this was an open space, because, you know, I'm still being drugged. I don't know where I'm at. I'm just absolutely defenseless. And so my only defense is to really show him the human that was in front of him and hope that it'd be less likely that he would kill me. He eventually then leaves and comes back and, says he's going to have to do it. And ... I mean, [sighs] during it, I still have these blacked out swim goggles on, and I'm like, *this is just going to look like a rape*. I don't ... 'cause I think he said something like it should look consensual or ... [sighs] And I just try to detach.

[to Aaron]

Phoebe: And at the same time this is going on to Denise, you're at the police station, and they've just told you, 'Aaron, well, it's clear you're lying.' What happens next? What did they tell you to do, or ...?

Aaron: After Detective Mustard went after me, I kind of gave a more forceful answer than I had prior to, and he— I told him, 'I'm not gonna say I did anything 'cause I didn't do it.' And 'Where do we go from here? You guys need to find her.' And he tells me we'll figure out what we're gonna do next and leaves the room. Again, I'm left alone for hours in this cold room in prison clothes. I ask if my brother's there. They tell me they don't know, even though my brother was in the police station with my parents. But they kept me isolated. They wouldn't even let me go to the bathroom by myself. And eventually they asked me if I'll take a polygraph to eliminate me as a suspect. And I knew I was telling the truth ... I've never blamed them for looking at me as a suspect 'cause I was the last person to be with Denise. I just didn't realize I was going to be the only suspect and they would ignore all sorts of evidence. So I did the polygraph, and it was done by

Special Agent Peter French ... and you sit there, you can't take a deep breath, you can't shift, you can't move your head. You got a blood pressure cuff squeezing your arm. And the whole time you're afraid that maybe your body is— what is the proper response that your body's giving. [music comes in] At the time it's three in the morning when they're doing this. And after we're done, Agent French puts me in a corner of the room. He angles himself where he's just not quite blocking the exit, but I would have to step around him. And just tells me, 'There's no doubt in my mind that you just failed this miserably. You know where she is. And you need to tell us where she is.' [music fades out]

[as narrator]

Phoebe: Aaron says the special agent continued accusing him of knowing exactly where Denise was for almost forty minutes.

Here's the tape.

[audio from Aaron's interrogation comes in]

Agent French: *Something happened to her that you didn't plan? Maybe [indistinguishable] ... I don't know. You tell me! But it can't start with three guys showing up at the house, taking her away. That's not what happened. You know where she is.*

Aaron: *I don't know where she is!*

[audio from interrogation ends]

[to Phoebe] [music comes in]

And all you wanted it to do is make it stop. I knew I wasn't gonna tell that I killed Denise, but I can only imagine what other people have gone through. Eventually I get a word in, I ask him, 'What evidence do you guys have that I did anything?' And he couldn't point to it. And I asked for a lawyer.

[as narrator]

Phoebe: The special agent left the interrogation room. Aaron says he fell asleep on three chairs he pulled together. Eventually the detective on the case, Detective Matt Mustard came into the room with Aaron's brother.

Aaron: And they were lying to my brother entire time outside the interrogation room saying I was having a schizophrenia breakdown – that they know I killed Denise and they wanted to extract a confession out of me. My own brother. They're trying to get a confession. And then, [sighs] when I saw him, I just started breaking down ... 'cause it

was like the first time there was someone there to help me. [hesitates] And he had to leave because he needed to get me a lawyer. If they didn't send them in, I don't know if they would have ever got me an attorney. I would've been stuck in that room forever. That's what it felt like. When my brother said that we should get him an attorney 'cause it's my constitutional right, Detective Mustard said, 'I'd like to try a few more things.' Thankfully, my attorney Dan Russo picked up the phone when Ethan called and got down the station to help me get out of there. [music fades out]

[to Denise]

Phoebe: Denise, during this time, what happened?

Denise: He had me shower again. And this time he said that I could have the goggles off when I'm not in the room with him. And there was a bunch of toiletries laid out. I took it all as rewards for being compliant. And just felt like he was just trying to condition me. And later that evening, he ordered me pizza. He gave me wine and he acted like a remorseful abuser. Just very soft. And ... he gave me more of the sedative saying that it was protocol and I eventually passed out again. The next morning, I asked about Aaron, and he said he wasn't sure what was going on at that end. And then later that morning, he said that two of his associates are going to come to the house and I could hear a truck pull up. It sounded like a truck, 'cause it was just a different type of engine, higher from the ground than the car that I was driven in. And I could hear car doors open. The bedroom door was opened and then closed. And then, I couldn't quite hear what was being said. There was always music being played. And then about twenty minutes later, they left. The car drove off. And as the car is driving off, he comes back in saying, 'They're gone. We're not gonna— it'll just be us. They won't need to come back. And then not long after that, he wakes me again to say that we need to record a proof of life. And he explains what this proof of life is 'cause I don't know. And he says that it needs to have my name in it. It needs to have a current event to verify it's the same day when I'm giving this, and a specific detail about me that only people close to me would know. And so, we go over this and he has me repeat it several times, feeding me the lines until he thinks I've got it. And tells me to go ahead and start. And so, it said something more or less of ... 'I'm Denise Huskins. I've been kidnapped, but otherwise I'm fine.' And then I give the current event and my first concert that I went to. And he said, 'Good, got it.' And I just fell over into the bed and passed out again. I didn't know who he was sending it to. I figured it was probably going to be sent to Aaron, but I didn't know. And then hours went by again. And eventually at some point he came back in to say that the recording of that first rape, of course he didn't call it a rape, wasn't good enough. And this time, I can't wear the goggles ... and we'd have to kiss and say things to make it seem like this is an affair. Like we'd been seeing each other for a while ... yeah, I mean, [sighs] so he tapes my eyes shut and we go through it all ... and I perform because I don't want this to happen again. And I ... really felt like I was performing to save my life.

Aaron: There was an FBI agent who was a hostage negotiator, which I initially took out as a positive sign. He told me that he was just catching up. And I needed— they wanted to ask me a few more questions. Eventually they play the proof of life for me. I just remember hearing Denise, feeling— knowing how scared she was, but her ability to stay calm... but I could hear the tremble in her voice. And so then the police asked me to look through my text messages and phone calls on my phone that they've had in possession since I had called him. While I'm looking through, there was multiple— there's tons of messages and calls. And then my lawyer's paralegal notices that my phone's on airplane mode.

[to Aaron] —

Phoebe: You're kind off the grid, which would have ...

Aaron: No, the police put my phone on airplane mode.

Phoebe: Which could have put Denise in even greater harm if you had gone off the grid.

Aaron: Yeah, and when I take it off airplane mode, it just gets flooded by more and more text messages. Multiple phone calls. Literally my phone maxes out on voicemails. And I just thinking during that time kidnappers could be calling, like, one of those phone calls could lead them to Denise. Then they ask me to go through my emails, which I had given the police access to all those as well. And as I looked through the laptop that they provided me, I see that there was a few emails that have been at least open, most likely read. And one of them, actually multiple of them, are from the kidnappers saying that they were going to call around 9:00 p.m. And this was now almost 24 hours after that email was received. [sighs] I've never been that angry in my entire life. I ... literally ... my vision starts shaking. Because they had the opportunity to track and find her and they just ignored it. And this is more than 24 hours after the kidnappers had sent the emails. And now we're getting close to 36 hours since the home invasion. Detective Mustard, the day before told me the kidnappers weren't communicating at all. And later we found out that the kidnappers actually did call three times within five minutes, on Monday night when they said they were going to call. But as far as we know, they never investigated that lead.

[to Denise]

Phoebe: When did you find out that— or did you find out that Aaron had— that they'd lost contact with Aaron, and that he had gone to the police? What happened next?

Denise: I think sometime that evening or later that afternoon, he told me that they had lost contact with Aaron. At first, he said he wasn't sure why. If either Aaron didn't want to

fulfill the tasks, or if maybe he went to the police and I knew that he wouldn't have just left me hanging on my own. Eventually he said Aaron did go to the police. It's being covered in the media, but you know, it doesn't really worry us because it'd be good PR for our group to show that they're capable of fulfilling an operation like this, and could still release the victim quote, unquote, "unharmful." And then later he shared with me that there was an article out there describing that Aaron went to the police and he had me read it.

And as I was reading it, I read a quote from my dad saying— telling me to stay strong. And that the families they're doing what they can. And as soon as I started reading it, I broke down and started sobbing. [sighs] The whole time, I just had hoped that they didn't know. I just hoped that I was just kind of in it on my own 'cause I couldn't ... emotionally handle what that could be doing to them. [sighs] And as I'm crying there, he puts his hand on my back and says, 'Oh, I know this must be hard to read it out loud. Must feel real, finally feel real ...' or something like that. And I just cried and said, 'No, I just can't imagine what my family is going through.' But that whole time, the two rapes, I mean, I never cried in front of them. And that was the first time he ... I felt like he broke me. Every time I talked to him, I said like, 'You're gonna kill me. I know you're gonna kill me.' Just didn't see that it'd be a possibility. Why would he risk releasing me? And he just kept saying, 'That's not what we're in this for. We're not going to do that. We're going to release you after 48 hours. Late Tuesday night, early Wednesday morning is the release.' And he was consistent about it, but I didn't believe him. And as the clock was ticking down to that 48 hours, I was starting to prepare myself to have to change my game plan. And especially 'cause he was so consistent with it, I told myself, *You know what, if that 48 hours comes and goes and he doesn't follow through with it, then he's never going to release me. And I'm going to have to figure out a way to not take the sedatives and find something to use as a weapon.* And I was preparing myself mentally for a fight to the death to save myself. He said that we were going to leave around 2:00 a.m. that next morning. And he woke me up and was getting things together and put me in the front seat of the car this time. And we're leaving and I'm somewhat relieved, but then at the same time going, *Oh my God, maybe he's just taking me away from this home. So he could take me somewhere and kill me.* And so again, I'm just swinging back and forth with that, but I'm trying to show him that he can trust me to release me. That he can take me somewhere. And that I've been calm. And I haven't screamed. And I haven't tried to escape. And one point on the drive, 'cause he gave me another sedative I'm in and out of consciousness. He wakes me up to let me go to the bathroom and I could tell it's quiet. He said it's a rest stop. And as he pulls me out of the car and I'm taking a few steps over gravel and dirt I'm thought, *Oh my God, it's still dark out. This is when he is going to kill me. Any second, I'm gonna hear a gunshot and that's it that. It's gonna be over.* And before I know it, hear the echo of a door closing and I pull up the blindfold and I'm actually in a bathroom, like a rest stop campground bathroom.

And I realize ... that's when I realize: *This was his last chance. He is actually going to release me.* And hours go by in the car. Along the ride, he gives me tape again, and put sunglasses over my eyes so in the daylight it doesn't look so suspicious. And eventually were in stop-and-go traffic. He says we're in L.A. and then keeps driving. And wakes me back up and says he's where he said he was going to release me, which was within walking distance to my mom's house. He had said, 'There's two things you can't say to the police, 'cause you're going to talk to the police, Aaron went to the police. Two things you can't say is anything about us being in the military or anything about us having sex. And I know where your family lives. We watch our victims.' So now the threat's, not just against me, but it's against my family as well. And so, he takes me out of the car and tells me to count to ten. And he drives off. I count to ten. And eventually I pulled the tape off of my eyes and I walked down this alley thinking I could be anywhere. But I turned the corner and I look at the street name, and it's the street where my mom lives, where I grew up on. [music comes in] And I'm finally free.

So I just start walking. I'm still heavily sedated and just kind of stumbling down the street, just thinking— I can think of is, *I have to get to my mom and dad. I just need them to hug me and hold me and say that it's okay. And that I'm safe.* And I go to my mom's house, she's not home. I go to her the next-door neighbors'. They're not home. And my dad lives a mile from her. So, I start walking to his house. I stopped someone to use the phone. And I'm trying not to cause any alarm or attention because I was instructed not to. Both— call my mom, dad, goes to voicemail. I leave a message for my dad saying, 'I'm okay. And I don't have a phone. I'm walking down to your house. This is the route I'm going to go.' I get to his house. And again, he's not home. I talked to a neighbor, she takes me in, and I use the bathroom. And within minutes, I step out of the bathroom, and I see two Huntington Beach police officers coming in and they asked me, 'Are you Denise Huskins?'

I say, 'Yes.'

'Were you kidnapped?'

I say, 'Yes.'

The first thing that concerned me with speaking to them was that the one that was really talking to me, he was holding a recording device by his side ... discretely. Like, he didn't tell me he was going to need to record me. And so then that scared me. And it scared me wondering too, *Was this recording going to get out? And what I say to them, is that going to get out to the public?* Again, because of those threats. And so, then I'm very aware the possibility of the kidnappers finding out what I say. And then I'm afraid of fully disclosing what really happened. However, I do go through the whole thing, the home invasion, the kidnapping, being held captive. And I say how they treated me nicely, that

they let me shower and have food and water. And initially the officer says that a detective is going to come in and talk to me, and CSI is going to come in. I keep asking to talk to my parents. If I could just talk to them and they say, 'Yeah, a little later.' And I hear helicopters outside, and people gathering, and time kept going on. And that's when I just started wondering— it just ... something didn't feel right. And finally, my cousin comes in with my aunt. My cousin's an attorney and that's why they let him in. And he tells the officers to step outside. He comes to me, asks me— the first question anyone asks me, he gives me a choice, 'What do you need right now?'

And I say, 'I just want to go somewhere safe. I just want to finally feel safe.'

[as narrator]

Phoebe: Her family took her to her aunt's house. Her mother and father and her uncle who was also a lawyer, were all at the Northern California. [music comes in] They had gone to Vallejo to see if they could be helpful and find out more. Her uncle wanted to speak with her.

Denise: And we get on the phone. And he says, 'They don't believe you.'

Phoebe: We'll have the rest of Denise and Aaron's story in our next episode.

Criminal is created by Lauren Spohrer and me. Nadia Wilson is our senior producer. Susanna Roberson is our producer. Engineering by Russ Henry. Audio mix by Johnny Vince Evans, Michael Raphael, and Rob Byers, of Final Final V2. Special thanks to Lilly Clark.

Julienne Alexander creates original illustrations for each episode of Criminal. You can see them at thisiscriminal.com.

We're on Facebook and Twitter @criminalshow. You can read more about Aaron and Denise's story in *Victim F: From Crime Victims to Suspects to Survivors*. We'll have a link on our website.

Criminal is recorded in the studios of North Carolina Public Radio, WUNC. We're a proud member of Radiotopia from PRX, a collection of the best podcasts around

I'm Phoebe Judge. This is Criminal.

[music fades out] [Radiotopia jingle]

END OF EPISODE.