

THE BEST REVENGE SERIES™

# Awaken

The Awakening of the Human Spirit  
on a Healing Journey

*Inspired by a True Event*

by Susan M. Omilian JD



**Butterfly Bliss Productions LLC**  
West Hartford, CT

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*This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.*

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For

Maggie

1980–1999

*This is not your story.  
But I hope this is the way you  
would want this story told.*

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## Note from the Author

In writing this novel, I employed one of the best tools that a fiction writer has — the “what if” method of finding the story. My thought process began with a true event: the murder of my nineteen-year-old niece Maggie in 1999 by her ex-boyfriend.

From that I imagined and constructed a story by asking myself questions. What if I put my fictional characters in a similar situation? What would they do? What would happen to them? How would they feel? Then what next, next, and next?

So “inspired by a true event” is the best way I can describe how I got the idea for this novel. But the characters and their back stories are all from my imagination. I have spun a story that starts with a horrific act of murder, then chronicles its traumatizing impact on those left behind. Ultimately, though, this is a story about taking the journey beyond abuse to grow, change, and heal in the aftermath of a tragedy.

Sadly, as in real life, not everyone in the novel will pursue a healing journey. But I like to think of this novel as a fictional dramatization of the journey many of us will take after a traumatic event from victim to survivor to “thriver.” Since my niece’s death and in her honor, I have worked with hundreds of women who have been impacted by domestic violence, sexual assault, and child abuse and helped them find a path forward in their lives. They have a longing for something else good and positive to happen to them, but they need someone to show them how to reclaim their lives after abuse. I have been inspired by their courage and strength to take the critical next step forward and amazed by the sheer magnitude of what they have accomplished.

In connecting with a part of themselves untouched by all that has happened, they have awakened to the positive thriver energy inside them. They have created new, exciting futures for themselves and their children by getting new or better jobs, going back to school, singing or painting again, and finding new, wonderful places to live. They also have healthy relationships that have filled their lives with love, peace, and joy.

In this novel and in the upcoming books in *The Best Revenge Series*<sup>™</sup>, I have invited my fictional characters, Lacey and Lisette, to awaken to this journey of thriving. Living well is indeed the best revenge! As a writer, it has been a joy for me to help them find their inner thriver energy, even if it is just in my imagination.

I invite you too, my readers, to take the journey to your own happy place inside and live out your dreams. That's what thriving is all about!

*Susan M. Omilian*

*"My mission in life is not merely to survive, but to thrive; and to do so with some passion, some compassion, some humor, and some style."*

*"Surviving is important. Thriving is elegant."*

— Maya Angelou

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*Living well is the best revenge.*

— George Herbert

*What we have once enjoyed we can never lose.  
All that we love deeply becomes a part of us.*

— Helen Keller

*Your vision will become clear when you look into your heart . . .  
Who looks outside, dreams.  
Who looks inside, awakens.*

— Carl Jung



## PROLOGUE

*April 5, 1996*

### *The Escape*

She saw the flashing lights of the police car in the rearview mirror of her father's pickup truck when she was about half an hour out of town. She had gone to the pay phone down the street from the bar, where she called in a report of the fire without giving her name. Her plan was to drive the truck as far as she could on the tank of gas she had filled it with earlier that day and then just leave it where it stopped.

She had been crying ever since she had left her father's bar. There, less than an hour ago, she had been so calm and cool as she lit the match and watched the place go up in flames. Now she could feel the panic setting in. What had she done? Did she really think she'd get away with it? What was going to happen to her? There was no going back now. The cops would pull her over, and soon she would be under arrest for killing Ralph. He deserved it, she thought. He was a mean, miserable son of a bitch, and no father to her. She had killed him, and she didn't even feel sorry. In fact, she was glad, even relieved, that he was out of her life forever. She hated him that much.

Then she thought of her mother. How could her mother have ever loved a man like him? How could she have left her with him? Her mother never spoke much about Ralph when she was alive,

and certainly not when she was dying of the cancer that slowly ate away her body. She must have thought that when she died Ralph would change – that he would love and take care of their daughter. But didn't she know that he always was and always would be a liar and a bastard? He lied about everything, and he didn't care who he hurt – not even her, his own daughter.

It was all Ralph's fault that she was stuck in this nightmare. If only he had been the kind of father who had cared and watched out for her, this wouldn't be happening to her now. If only. If only. If only.

"Step out of the truck, young lady," the tall police officer said as he came up to the driver's side and flashed a light in her eyes. "You're not going anywhere tonight."

She didn't recognize this cop as anyone who had ever come into Ralph's bar, and she was so exhausted she decided not to argue with him. Instead she dragged her weary body out of the truck and stood on the side of the road. A second cop, younger than the first and with short-cropped blonde hair, searched the truck from the passenger side.

The other officer spoke to her again. "You don't have a license, do you?"

"I've got a learner's permit. It's in my purse." She leaned against the truck and closed her eyes.

"Bob, can you get the purse?" He signaled with the light to his partner. Then he turned back to her. "Do you have any other identification?"

"Just my library card. But it's expired."

He asked gruffly, "Are you Lisa Rozniak?"

She stared at him blankly, but then remembered that he wouldn't have any way of knowing about the transformation she was planning. After tonight she would use another name instead of Lisa, a dorky name she always hated. She wanted a

*Prologue*

name that was more – what? Grown-up and sexy-sounding, not like a little kid.

Before she could respond, the cop added impatiently, “Is your father Ralph Rozniak?”

“Yes,” she said in almost a whisper.

“Is that an affirmative to both of my questions?”

She looked puzzled, like she didn’t understand what he was asking her.

“Look,” he said slowly and loudly as if she was hard of hearing. “You’re Lisa and your father’s Ralph, right?”

“Yeah, right.”

“How old are you, and what are you doing out here all by yourself?”

“I just turned sixteen today, and I’m –” She paused for a moment. “I’m going to my aunt’s house. She lives over in Clark’s Bay.”

“Does she know that you’re driving in the middle of the night without a driver’s license?” He sneered at her. “I bet she doesn’t. I bet you don’t even have an aunt in Clark’s Bay.”

He didn’t wait for a response. He looked up at his young partner standing next to him, who spoke for the first time.

“Not much in the truck, Pete. And only a little cash in her purse.”

The older officer looked back at her. “You’re going have to come with me in the squad car, young lady. Officer Martin here will drive your truck back.”

“Am I under arrest?”

“Arrest? For what?” he asked quickly. “Is there something I should arrest you for?”

When she didn’t reply, he grabbed her elbow and led her to the car. She eyed him as he opened the rear car door and she slid into the back. Her hands touched the cool leather of the seat and

## AWAKEN

she looked down at her sneakers, scuffed and soiled. When she looked up through the wire mesh that separated her from the officer in the front seat, she saw him pull the radio handset off its perch on the dashboard.

“This is Unit Eight. Come in, over.”

When a voice over the radio squawked back at him, he talked as he started the car’s engine. “We’ve found the truck and the girl. She came quietly. We’re bringing the truck in too. No sign of anything suspicious.”

He snickered. “Unless you count an expired library card.”

## CHAPTER ONE

*October 17, 1999*

### *Caught Off Guard*

The words and music from the Donna Summer's "Bad Girls" disco tune blared out from the speakers on the stage as all hell broke loose at the Bare Bottom Dance Club.

Lisette stood there, in her furry white bikini top and G-string, watching a wall of drunken, angry men, yelling and screaming, storm the stage and head straight for her.

This isn't supposed to happen, she thought in the split second she had to think. Then she screamed, a shrill, panic-stricken cry that instantly was drowned out by the loud music going on and on.

She loved to play the music loud when she danced, the louder the better. She liked to hear and feel the beat all around her. When it shook the stage under her feet and sent shock waves out into the audience, she was ready to dance. And she loved the song that was currently playing. She had added it to her act out in Los Angeles and the crowd there had gotten into it, singing along with all the whistles, beep-beeps, and toot-toots. But now the music was part of the deafening roar all around her – the sound of a sea of drunken men in heat, stampeding onto the stage, beating up on each other, and yelling in sharp, hoarse voices for her. Like a tidal

wave, this roar was about to engulf her. Luckily, Erick, one of the club's bouncers, who had hands the size of Texas, was at her side, pulling one guy after another off her. But as quickly as he did, someone else came at her, trying to grab her, touch her, grope her.

"Get away from me, you little pervert," she screeched at one particularly nasty drunk who lunged at her from behind, yelling, "I love you, I love you!"

She turned around and elbowed him in the face. That sent him reeling backward, and he fell to the stage with a splat. In that moment, Lisette saw her chance to escape. But just as she turned to run off the stage, the guy she had decked reached up from the floor and grabbed her leg.

"Marry me, marry me," he slobbered, attaching himself to her ankle and pawing his way up her leg.

God, she hated her job on nights like this! Why had it been her dumb luck to open at the Bare Bottom Dance Club late on a Sunday night when the college students with fake IDs got two watered-down drinks for the price of one if they showed their school card? By the time she had gotten onstage as the headline stripper, the audience was pretty tanked up. Of course, she was used to having men go nuts over her long blonde hair, big breasts, and the kinky getup she wore. But tonight, as she was taking off her costume for the crowd, the audience was pushing and shoving each other down in front until one guy took a swing at another and a brawl broke out. Everyone leaped onto the stage, and now this idiot wouldn't let go of her leg.

She tried to pry his fingers off her almost-numb flesh, but he hung on to her with a grip like a steel trap. Desperate now, she yelled for Erick. "Get this asshole off me!"

On stage, she was always in charge, but this was way out of control!



When Lacey pushed open the door of Ari's college dorm room on Sunday night before midnight, Ari was slumped down in front of his computer. The door wasn't locked, and she hadn't knocked. She just barged in. She didn't care – she was that pissed at him.

The moment he saw her standing in the doorway, he bolted upright in his chair and his face lit up. He looked startled to see her, as though he had been expecting her but somehow now that she was there, he was surprised.

She stood there, backlit by the light in the hall, glaring down at him. He stared back, his eyes aglow like she was still the brightest spot in his life. But how could he think that? she wondered. They hadn't seen each other in about a week and as far as she was concerned, there was no magic left between them.

"I'm here like you asked," she said, "but I can't stay long. I told Sophie I'd be back in our room in ten minutes. I mean it, Ari. Ten minutes."

"In ten minutes, my angel," he said with a lilt in his voice that surprised her, "we can do a lot." He reached out to touch her, but she pulled her arm away and pushed herself back against the open door.

"Don't give me that 'angel' shit," she said. "How many times do I have to tell you? It's over between us!"

"You'll always be my angel. You can't change that."

"No, you're the one who can't change. When are you going to grow up?"

"I am all grown up." He grabbed his crotch and lowered his voice seductively. "Straight and tall, just for you. Can't you tell?"

She rolled her eyes. "Is that all you ever think of? Getting some girl into bed?"

"No, I think of you all the time. I can't get a damn thing done around here."

She leaned her head back against the door. "Jesus, Ari, it's not my fault!"

"Oh, no? If you hadn't been sucking face with that bastard at The Keg, none of this would have happened."

"I wasn't kissing Jack! I was dancing with him. You're the one who's a bastard."

"I'm the bastard because I get upset when I see the girl I love with another guy?"

"You don't love me, and you can't tell me what I can or can't do anymore." The agitation in Lacey's voice showed as the night at The Keg came rushing back to her now. Her body shook with rage. "If I want to dance with ten guys, you can't stop me. Jesus, Ari! Why do we keep going over this same old stuff? What do you want from me?"

"I don't want anything from you," he snapped and sank back down in his chair, his arms folded tightly across his chest.

God! How he infuriated her. Now he was going to sulk and show her how angry he was at her, but she was sick of his games. It was time for this to end. She had no future with Ari, and she'd never give in to what he wanted. It was over. She had to make him understand that. That's why she agreed to come here tonight. Why was he being so impossible?

"Look," she began, shoring up her voice so it sounded strong and firm. "If you think you can talk me into getting back together with you, forget it." She grabbed the doorknob and made a move back into the hall. "I'm out of here."

"No! No!" He leaped from his chair and jammed the palm of his hand against the door. "Please, don't go. Please," he begged. "Come and sit down over there." He motioned across the room to his roommate's bed. "And I'll sit here," he added, walking back to his desk chair, his eyes still glued on her. "I won't touch you, I promise."

Lacey stood in the doorway, her arms wrapped around her and her foot tapping the floor. She curled her lip and weighed her next move.

"I don't want to fight with you," he continued. "I just want you to read something for me like you used to. Remember? That's why I asked you to come here tonight."

She looked at him, then at his roommate's bed, and then back out into the hall. She wanted to storm out of there, but she knew that wouldn't solve anything. Suddenly she felt sorry for him. After all, she was the one who had dumped him. She wanted to let him down easy, but he was making it so hard. So she had to stay, play along with him for a while until she could say what she had come to say and then leave. Maybe that was the only way to settle this thing with him once and for all.

"I'm sorry I upset you," he went on. His voice was softer, and suddenly he sounded more like the Ari she knew. That made her feel a pang in her heart for him, like she had felt the day she first met him when he was so charming, so open, so much fun to be with. Maybe if she just tried harder now to let him know how sorry she was that he was taking this so hard.

She relented just a bit and said softly, "I'm not upset." Then she sighed and added, "All right. What do you want me to read?"

"I have to print it out. It will only take a minute."

She looked at him, this time with a little more kindness in her eyes.

"Okay," she said as she slowly moved away from the door and let it close behind her. "But then I have to get back. I still have homework."

"I never thought you studied so much," Ari said with a smile. "You're so smart. I'm the one who's stupid."

"You're not stupid," she said, crossing the room and settling down uneasily on the edge of the bed next to the door that led

to the bathroom and Ari's suitemates' room. "You need to apply yourself more, that's all."

"No, compared to you, I'm an idiot. You're a wonderful writer, and I can't even keep my English words straight. That's why I need your help. I've got to get my grades up or my dad won't pay my tuition. You know what a bastard he is. He couldn't care less if I'm happy or well-educated. He's sure I'll end up an old wino, lying drunk in the gutter with nothing to show for my life. God! How he loves screwing with my head!"

"Look," Lacey hedged, trying not to get caught up in all his problems. "I said I'd help you. So can we just get on with this, please?"

"Sure, sure," he said breezily as he reached over to the keyboard of his computer and pushed a few buttons. Soon the printer started up, and he went on. "I appreciate you coming over. This damn paper is due tomorrow and I haven't been able to focus on it. I couldn't sleep a wink last night. I kept thinking about the Homecoming Dance last fall. Do you remember it?" He shut his eyes for a moment and spoke as if he was talking about a dream. "It was the first time I saw you. You were a freshman, and I asked you to dance. You said yes. I couldn't believe it. You were wearing that green velvet dress with your hair all piled up on top of your head. God, you looked beautiful, so beautiful."

His voice trailed off, but a few seconds later the bitterness he must have felt towards her since she broke up with him came spewing up like bile in his throat. His eyes popped open and his face went dark as he ripped into her. "How could things get so bad in just one year? You went from being the most loving, caring person in the whole world to such a cruel, heartless bitch. Did you ever really love me? Or do you just enjoy making me feel like a worthless piece of shit?"

She sat there stunned. What was he – crazy? He was twisting everything around, trying to make it all her fault. Did he really hate her that much and believe all those terrible things about her?

Suddenly she felt scared. For the first time since she walked into the room, she wondered how this was all going to end. She thought she'd tell him to leave her alone one more time and then leave. But maybe that was not what he was thinking. What was he thinking? Was he capable of doing something to hurt her? He had never hit her or anything like that. That wasn't Ari. But he had been pressuring her, pushing their relationship too far, too fast, and he got so jealous if she even talked to another guy. She just wanted it to stop. Why couldn't she make him stop? What was wrong with him? Maybe she should have listened to what Sophie had said to her about him after the episode at The Keg.

"This guy is creepy. He's trouble, big trouble!"

But how much trouble? Lacey's mind raced now. She knew that he was immature, but how far would he go with this rage he had against her? What was he capable of? His voice, loud and demanding, took her out of her thoughts.

"There's something I want to show you," he said, standing up and taking the few steps over to his bed.

She stood up too and, almost without thinking, launched into what she had come prepared to say because now she was shaking inside and wanted to leave. "I'm sorry that things have changed between us, Ari, but they have. You have to stop tormenting yourself about this and move on. You have to believe that someday you'll meet someone else and—"

"I don't want anyone else," his voice, flat and oddly detached, broke in. "I want you."

She hesitated, gauging his mood, but his eyes looked haunted and she felt a cold, scary distance between them.

"But you can't have me," she went on, her voice rising. "You have this idea that if you keep bugging me, I'll give in. But I won't. It's no use." Then her voice was loud and shrill. "You can't go on like this. It's not good!"

Suddenly she stopped and the room was silent except for the printer.

"I've got to go," Lacey said in a rush of words, her heart pumping and her stomach hurting. "This is getting way too crazy for me."

"But you have to see this first."

"I don't have time to read your paper tonight."

"Not my paper," he said with a twisted smile. "A surprise just for you."

He faced his bed and reached underneath it for something. He kept it close to his body as he raised it up to his waist. She strained to see what it was. At first, all she could tell was that it was long and shiny. By the time she realized it was a gun, a rifle, he had it pointed at his head.

"Oh my God!" she screamed and fell back. "Ari, what are you doing? Where did you get that?"

She took a step toward him, but then stopped when she saw his finger on the trigger. "Ari, don't! Don't!"

But he didn't stop. He closed his eyes, and suddenly she knew what was going to happen next. She lunged toward the bathroom door. She could get out that way. This bastard wasn't going to kill himself in front of her. She wasn't going to watch it. No way! This wasn't going to happen to her. But before she could reach the door, she heard a loud popping sound and felt a sharp pain in her back. Her legs went out from under her, and suddenly she was on the floor on her back, twisted around, looking up at him.

"If I can't have you," he said with no emotion at all in his voice, "no one can."

"Please, Ari!" she screamed, her heart pounding hard and her voice filled with terror. She had never had a gun pointed at her before. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry."

She closed her eyes, thinking she'd feel something more but she didn't. This time, the sound was like fireworks going off, and

it shattered the night as the screen before her eyes went red – blood red. Then, amazingly, her whole life flashed before her, from the time she was a little girl to only a few moments ago when she walked into Ari’s room. It was like a movie, but it was going very, very fast. Almost too fast, but then it was her life, so she knew what was going on.

As she felt herself sinking deeper and deeper into this cinematic whirl, the story shifted and other people, people she didn’t know or even recognize, filled the screen. She watched with fascination as another drama unfolded. This one felt so familiar, as though it had happened to her already but she couldn’t remember how it ended. All the things she had been doing the last few days and much, much more were mixed up in what she was seeing, but what was she seeing? Was it a dream? Was Ari in this dream? Or was he someplace else? Did she hear another shot, or was it that blasted music that was pounding in her head now? God, it was loud. And there were people yelling on a stage somewhere. She felt danger there, like someone was trying to hurt her or someone else.

Where was she? Who were these people? What was happening to her? She tried to figure it out, but the music grew so loud that she couldn’t hear herself think. If someone could just turn the damn music down! What was wrong with these people anyway?

What the *hell* was going on?



With the disco music still blasting up on the stage, Lisette looked down into the face of the man who had her leg in his grip. He wasn’t letting go of her no matter what she did to shake him off and she was afraid. With the hungry look she saw in his eyes, maybe he wasn’t going to let go until he got what he wanted from her. But what was that? Just when she feeling hopeless, suddenly Erick spun around and grabbed the guy off the floor,

squeezing him around the chest so hard with his huge hands that it knocked the air out of him and he finally let go of her leg.

Then Erick yelled, "Get out of here, Lisette! Go to your dressing room and lock the door."

She didn't argue. She ran for the back curtain, scurried backstage, and raced down the hall. She told herself that when she got to her dressing room, she'd call Mo. She didn't care how late it was. Her agent was going to hear about this. This shouldn't be happening to her. She was a dancer, an artist. Her mother had taken her to too many dance classes when she was a kid to have her career end up like this.

She turned off the long main hallway that led from the stage to a shorter one that dead-ended at her dressing room door. She could feel herself relax a little, knowing she was almost there, almost safe. But when she got to the door and grabbed the knob, it wouldn't open.

"Damn it!" she screamed and kicked at the door. Who the hell locked this? she fumed. She didn't have a key. She stood back and jammed her shoulder against the door, hoping it was just stuck, but it wouldn't open. Then the music from the stage suddenly quieted down and she heard a noise coming from out in the hallway where she had just been. She stopped to listen for a moment. Was someone coming? Maybe it was Erick to see if she was okay. Then she definitely heard footsteps coming toward her down the long hallway.

"Who's there?" she called out, her voice shaking. "Is someone there?"

A man stepped out from around the corner and she gasped. It was the lunatic that had her leg in a death grip on the stage. How did he get back here? Where were the bouncers? Oh God! She shuddered; the guy had that same hungry, haunted look on his face as before. Had he come to get what he wanted from her now?

What could she do? She was trapped alone in this tiny hallway, with nowhere to run or hide. Should she scream? Would anyone hear her?

She held his gaze, trying to stare him down, but he didn't flinch; he didn't move.

"What do you want?" she finally said, hoping that the rage in her voice might scare him off. But he didn't reply, only moved closer to her, his dark, clouded eyes locked on hers. She watched his face as he looked down, and his hand came up from behind his back. That's when she saw the knife.

"Oh, God!" she screamed, falling back against the door and grabbing at the knob. She frantically wiggled it up and down, back and forth, desperately trying to get it open. But it wouldn't budge. The only way out was past the man with the knife.

She stood her ground, although her legs were shaking and her stomach was churning.

"What do you want?" she repeated, but she got no reply. She wanted to beg, "Don't hurt me. Please don't hurt me!" but suddenly a bright light blocked her view of him. In the first flash of the light, she saw a girl with long blonde hair, standing with her arms folded across her chest. Then she vanished and a voice came into her head.

*Don't beg. Begging won't help. Stay calm. Never let a man trap you in a place where you can't get out. Think, girl, think. Whatever you do, don't make a sudden move. That could set him off. Back away from the door slowly, very slowly. That's it. Try to catch him off guard. You can do it.*

Terrified, Lisette listened to the voice, trusting it as if her mother was talking to her. She backed off, but she could feel the man coming closer and her legs went limp. Was this the end? Was this how she was going to die? What should she do? Should she stop listening to the voice?

Suddenly, the sound of sirens outside jolted her and an idea came to her.

“Police!” she yelled into the light. “They’re coming for you. Run now, run!”

She must have confused him, making him think the police were after him because he gasped and grunted, and then she heard his footsteps going down the hall to the back door of the club. When she looked again, the light was gone and so was he. Instead, Erick rushed toward her.

“Are you okay?” he asked. “I came as soon as I could.”

“There was a man with a knife,” she said, her breath coming in short gulps. “The sirens scared him away. He ran out the back door. The police will catch him.”

She fell against Erick. Her whole body shook as he put his arms around her, and she stood there in his embrace, trying to take in what had just happened to her.

“It’s okay,” Erick whispered into her ear. “I’m here. You’re safe now.”

She let herself stand there for a while, and then she slowly pulled away from him.

“The police will get him, right?” she said. “He could hurt someone.”

Erick shook his head. “The police aren’t here,” he said. “We didn’t call them. Those sirens are going down to the campus.” Lisette knew he was talking about the college that was only a few blocks from the club.

“Someone just came into the bar and said a girl was shot and killed there,” Erick added. “The whole place emptied out real quick.”

“Oh my God!” she gasped, and her thoughts went to a dark and scary place. She could have been murdered tonight too. If it weren’t for the voice and that light, she’d be dead.

"Are you all right?" Erick asked her again. He turned toward her dressing room. "Why didn't you go inside like I told you to?"

She looked at him, barely understanding his words, and then muttered, "I tried. The door was locked. I couldn't get in."

He gave her a look and reached for the door handle. He jiggled it a bit, lifted it up a notch, and the door pushed open.

"It gets stuck sometimes," he said, his voice heavy and thick. "Someone should have told you. I'm sorry!"

"It doesn't matter now," she said, too exhausted to be mad and too relieved to do anything but stumble into her dressing room.

"Why don't you put some clothes on and I'll walk you back to your hotel?" Erick offered. "The night air will calm you down and you'll get a good night's sleep." She nodded and sighed. Then he gave her a smile and added, "You'll be okay now."

He closed the door behind him, and she sank into the chair in front of her dressing table. She looked at her face in the mirror and saw what a mess it was. Her eyes were red and bloodshot, her skin pale. Her hair was all over the place. But that didn't matter. She was alive! But if that voice hadn't come to her, the man with the crazed look in his eyes might have killed her for sure.

If whoever killed that girl tonight at the college was anything like him, Lisette had some idea of what she must have gone through.

What a horrible way to die! And there was no one there to save her.

Why was she the only one tonight lucky enough to be alive?



Lisette woke up the next morning in her hotel room with something ringing in her ear. It took her a moment to figure out it was the phone. As she reached to grab it on the nightstand by her bed, she saw on the clock radio dial that it was only eight o'clock. Who the hell was calling her at this hour of the morning?

She was tired. She had been too afraid to close her eyes last night, scared that she'd see the face of the man with the knife or dream about the girl who had been killed at the college. Without much sleep, she could feel a migraine headache coming on and she wished the damn phone would stop ringing!

She grabbed it, and said groggily, "Hello?"

"Lisette?" a familiar voice on the other end said. "Are you all right?"

It was Mo, her agent, and he sounded frantic. "I got your message this morning," he went on. "What the hell happened last night?"

She had called him from her dressing room as Erick waited outside to take her back to her hotel. She had forgotten about leaving him a message until now, but she knew that she had sounded pretty frantic last night.

"I almost got trampled onstage," she began, her head pounding. "Then there was this guy with a knife who cornered me by my dressing room, and if I hadn't seen this light and heard a voice, I would have... I wouldn't be..." Her voice dropped off as the emotions she had felt last night – shock, fear, and relief – flooded back and overwhelmed her. Then her mind shifted and she went on, "When I heard the sirens, I said the first thing that popped into my head and – "

"Wait a minute!" Mo broke in. "Slow down! You're not making any sense."

"Of course I'm not!" she snapped, sitting up in bed with a jolt. She moaned as the sudden movement brought a sharp pain to the front of her head, and she fell back on the pillow. "That's why I want out," she went on. "Do you hear me? I'm not going back to that club. A girl got killed near there last night. I'm scared, Mo. I'm really scared."

"But I can't tell Wiley you're quitting just because some guys rushed the stage. You know that can happen anywhere. And I heard

about the girl. You know it's not Wiley's fault some girl was killed nearby. And why should you care? You didn't even know her."

"I do care. I'm serious. I'm not going back there. Period."

"Look," Mo said, his voice getting testy. "You're upset. Take some time, calm down, and call me back later. We'll talk."

"But you don't understand." Lisette's voice cracked. "I feel so... so..."

"So, so what?" His voice slowed down, as if he was trying to understand.

"I don't know. I feel like... like..." She paused, trying to find the right word, and then went on, "I feel bad, I guess. I feel bad about the girl who got killed."

"I know the story is all over the TV news today, but that's no reason for you to quit your job. What's that girl to you?"

"It's on the news?" Lisette asked eagerly. "What are they saying? What happened?"

"Only that her boyfriend shot her and then killed himself."

*So the little coward did do it! I'm glad he's dead.*

"So the little coward did do it!" Lisette blurted out, but the words felt like they had come from somewhere else.

"Yes, they said it was a lover's quarrel," Mo added.

*A lover's quarrel? You've got to be kidding. The little bastard didn't love me. He trapped me in his room and then pulled a gun.*

"It wasn't a lover's quarrel," Lisette insisted, but then she wondered how she could know that. What did she know about this girl? Suddenly, she had to know everything.

"Look, I've got to go," she told Mo, as she eyed the TV remote control on her nightstand. "You're right. I'm upset. I'll call you later."

"But wait! Don't hang up on me. What is going on?"

"Here's what's going on," she bristled. "I want out. I don't want to talk about it. I want you to fix it. Okay? Bye."

She slammed the phone down, reached for the remote, and switched on the set. She flipped through channels until she found a news program and the picture of the girl on the screen. Lisette couldn't believe it. She had long blonde hair and a face that she recognized instantly.

*Oh my God, it's me. They're talking about me like I'm dead. Am I? Am I really?*

It was the girl who had flashed before her eyes in the hallway last night. She was standing in the same way, with her arms folded across her chest.

*That's my high school graduation picture. The photographer made me pose like that. I look like I'm in charge of the world, don't I? Hey, I like that!*

This girl was wearing a heart-shaped locket around her neck, something Lisette had seen last night but didn't remember until now.

*That's my mom's locket. I always wear it.*

Lisette's mind raced. How could she have seen someone who was lying dead someplace else? Was that possible?

"Jesus!" she said aloud. "This is weird, too weird!"

*Weird? Here's something weird. Our names both start with "L." What's with that?*

The announcer said the girl's name was Lacey Lockhart and that she was only nineteen years old. Same age as me, Lisette thought. Same long blonde hair. Same everything I saw last night. But this Lacey was dead. How could I have seen her?

*I get it now. I'm dreaming. I didn't go to Ari's room last night. I'm asleep in my dorm room, and soon the alarm clock will ring and Sophie will have to pull me out of bed because I'm always late. She'll tease me about how I'll be late for my own funeral, and I'll tell her I dreamed I was a stripper and danced for men who lusted after my body and fought over me until they got so crazy they attacked me up onstage. Sophie will*

*tease me and say, "Yeah, sure! In your wildest dreams, Lacey! Sure!"*

Then another picture flashed on the screen. "This is Ari," the announcer said, "the man who killed Lacey." Lisette gasped. He had dark hair and a scowl on his face. How could a girl like Lacey be with someone like him? Someone who could kill her?

*Dead? I'm not dead. But seeing pictures of Ari and me on TV is strange.*

The announcer added that the couple had broken up recently, and that there had been no prior reports of violence between them.

*He's right. Ari never touched me. If he had, I would've beaten the snot out of him. Somehow he got a gun. I didn't see it there in his hand until the very end. The little bastard got me into his room and tried to kill himself! But I wouldn't watch it, no way!*

So he was her ex-boyfriend. That made sense. Lacey had dumped the creep, and he wanted her back. But if he couldn't have her, no one could.

*Ari's famous last words! How did you know that?*

When she said no, he killed her. It was that simple.

*Oh, my God, now I get it. He shot me! First in the back and then I fell down. He pointed the gun. I don't remember, but I felt the pain.*

Suddenly, Lisette felt a sharp, terrible pain in her own back, so intense that tears came to her eyes. What was happening? Where did this pain come from? It hurt so much.

*I remember feeling the pain and then floating off somewhere. Feeling like I was neither here nor there, like I was lost with no place to go.*

Lisette couldn't stand the pain. She doubled over and gasped for breath. She gulped for air but the pain only got worse.

*So I am dead. Ari killed me, and then he killed himself. This isn't a dream. I won't be waking up and telling Sophie anything. I'm not coming back. I'm never coming back. Oh, God! When will this pain end? Please, God, let it end.*

Then a heave came up from Lisette's stomach. She was going to throw up. The pain was so unbearable.

*But if I'm dead, then where am I? Am I in Lisette's body? How does this work? I can hear what she's saying, but can she hear me? She did last night, but now she's acting like she doesn't. Oh, God! Oh, God! What is happening to me?*

"Oh, God! Oh, God!" Lisette cried, as she ran into the bathroom and got down on her knees in front of the toilet. "What is happening to me?" She felt her stomach churn and her chest get tighter and tighter. The pain in her back was so intense that she could hardly breathe.

*She hears what I'm saying, and she feels my pain. If I get excited, her stomach gets upset. That's a start. We can do this. Ari is gone. I'm safe here with Lisette. I'm okay. I'm fine for now. It's okay, Lisette. We're fine.*

Lisette didn't throw up. Instead, she sat down on the bathroom floor and held her head in her hands. Slowly, the jitters in her stomach and the pain in her back eased. She took a deep breath. Maybe this was from the migraine she felt coming on when she woke up. Maybe she needed to get something to eat. She could get dressed and go get some breakfast. It wasn't even nine o'clock in the morning, and she wasn't usually up so early when she worked the night before. But this morning was different. She needed to take some time, have a cup of coffee, try to relax. Then she'd call Mo, tell him she was better, and they'd talk about a new club date for her. Soon she'd be back at work, and what happened to her and this Lacey Lockhart would be forgotten. A prayer her mother had taught her when she was a kid came into her head.

"May the souls of the faithful departed, through the mercy of God, rest in peace, Amen." Yes, dear God! Lisette thought. Let Lacey rest in peace. There was nothing more to do for her.

*But there is something you can do. Get me out of here! I'm in this crazy limbo place. Dead, but still here in the body of a stripper, for God's sake!*

*Caught Off Guard*

*“Rest in peace, Lacey,” Lisette whispered fervently. “It’s over!”  
But it’s not over. I want out. Somebody help me! Please help me!  
“Give it a rest, Lacey! Give it a rest.”*