

Angelika's Story

Hope never dies!

**A short story by
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It was 7:45 a.m. on a Sunday morning when I received the call.

She said her name was Angelika - she gave no last name.

Her voice carried a tone of resignation, a sort of finality, as if she were about to make a critical life or death leap.

"I'd like to meet with you, today, if possible," she asked.

I sensed in that very first question, by the way she lingered on that last word, that she anticipated rejection.

"Uhm," I hesitated as I tried to clear the sleep from my head.

"What I mean is that I want you to author my story, and this is my last day here. I simply do not have much time left."

Again, the words were couched in a subtle, yet tangible, if not withheld desperation.

I looked at my watch. "Well – yes, I guess we could meet up. What time were you thinking?"

"Now, that is, in the next hour or two," her voice wavered, like a salesperson anticipating the ultimate NO.

The undertone of urgency piqued the writer's side in me; that ghoulish alter-ego which hosted on and was tantalized by the prospect of the story yet untold. Authors, such as I, have all sorts of ideas written on pieces of paper, in

notebooks or stashed in a corner of our heads – but the intrigue of a new, yet unrevealed tale, is like honey to bees.

“Ok, I can do that?” I capitulated, staring despondently at my watch, realizing that my plans for a late Sunday sleep-in and a casual relaxed afternoon in front of the television had just been vanquished.

“I’m at the Longview Motel – do you know where it is?”

I tried to picture the place. “I’ll find it.”

“Room 303,” she paused. “Thank you, thank you so much,” she said, and with those words I felt an aching sense of pain traversing the phone line and touching me.

The whole conversation had lasted less than two minutes – and frankly, I was a little stunned by it.

I sat there for a time, thinking about what had just happened. Of course, it is not the first time I have been asked to write someone’s story; I am after all, an author, and a ghostwriter, but this was certainly the first time I had encountered such a circumstance.

Something about her voice, and the tone of her words, haunted me – like the dubious and mystical call of a siren from beyond the cold fog-ridden seas.

There was a sultry mystique about her tone, and the underpinning of desperation, which I had never experienced before with a client. And there was the fact that it all had to happen today, which was both compelling and worrisome to me.

Was she running from the law, a troubled marriage, or an abusive relationship, or what?

An hour later, I was in my car heading for Starbucks.

I am an acknowledged coffee-junkie, but not just any coffee – it must taste like coffee and not flavored water, which unfortunately most establishments in America serve to their clientele.

Here’s the thing; amidst the endless train of fast-food places which have taken over the American landscape, Starbucks is one of the few that somewhat approaches a coffee culture; where one can select from a countless array of worldly flavors and then sit, undisturbed by crying babies, flocks of screaming children, and whatever else generally charges through the doors of the average hamburger joint.

While I proudly stand by the red, white, and blue of American capitalism, I must admit that my challenging mind is often offended by a culture which, as advanced as our own, serves the worst and tasteless coffee on the face of the Earth. It is for that reason that I find Starbucks a last refuge and port of call to save my palate from torture.

The trip to the motel took me into a part of town I rarely venture to.

I found myself facing a three-level structure, with a 1960's style décor; metal-rail balconies rusted and worn by time and weather, dingy curtains over the windows, faded wood doors painted with a dirty pink hue, like the face of a harlequin in a cheap theater performance. It was beat-up, rundown and it looked as if it had not been repainted since the day it was built.

The area was seedy, with two liquor stores within sight, each with guerrilla-style steel bars over their windows, a common sight in Los Angeles and reminding me of an abandoned war zone.

Situated in one corner, like a prostitute flirting with her next client, stood a small grungy shop, fashioned with a typical flashing pink neon sign over the door, which read, NUDE GIRLS.

Despite live-streaming today, where porn was as easy to access as a touch of the finger, these undignified dens still managed to endure.

I took a deep breath as I pulled into the parking area and placed my car within view of the third-floor balcony.

What was I getting into - I thought? The whole affair, so far, did not bode well in my mind and I considered returning to my apartment with another cup of a coffee and a bear-claw, turning on the television and forgetting the whole thing – but then, the sound of her voice, her desperation, her words, echoed back at me, poking at my sense of conscience.

I let out an exasperated sigh.

Of course, it would haunt me forever if I walked away now, wondering if I had abandoned her in her most dire hour.

When I got to the door of room 303, it opened before I could even knock.

An exceptionally beautiful woman stood there – her eyes flitting briefly from side to side, clearly nervous, as if she were anticipating trouble.

She was young, by my best estimates, in her early twenties, with long chestnut hair which curled at the tips, landing gently below her shoulder level.

She had fresh make-up on and was wearing a T-shirt with the words Drama Queen brazenly displayed over her more than ample breasts. Beyond that, she was wearing tight blue jeans and a pair of ankle socks.

Seemingly satisfied that I was of no threat to her, her smile enlarged, and she extended a hand. I noticed, however, a palpable tension in her face and the nervous tick in her eyes as she continued to take glimpses over my shoulder.

"Hi... I am Angelika."

She led me into the small motel room.

The musty smell in the air immediately betrayed its age and dilapidated state.

The bed sat to one side with a faded tan colored spread over it, one which was frayed at the edges, also betraying its antiquity. A small table was situated

by the window, and two wooden chairs stood around it, like grizzled and forgotten soldiers still guarding a desolate island, decades after the war they once fought had long since ended.

It was a typically seedy motel, and the furniture looked like every other cheap motel I had seen – as if their architects had developed brain disease and had lost all sense of imagination, creativity, and originality. It was not a place where I would expect such a woman to stay, all of which begged for more answers to my growing sense of curiosity.

“I brought you a coffee and a pastry,” I said as I handed over the bag.

She smiled, a pretty smile, but reserved at best.

There was something withheld in her manner, a tense guardedness as her eyes watched me.

“Very considerate of you, thank you,” she said as she slipped into the chair across from me, folding one foot under her butt as she did.

As I planted myself onto the other chair, it creaked and moaned as it negotiated my weight.

There was no social foreplay, no introductions, and no request for credentials – nothing. She simply charged into the subject like a bull into the ring. “I found you on the internet. I was looking for a ghostwriter, and your site appealed to me.”

I nodded while watching her face.

“As you can tell,” she waved a dismissive hand around the room, with almost queen-like refinement, “I am not interviewing you from the Hyatt or Regency.”

“It’s okay,” I mumbled, trying to make her feel at ease, even though, frankly speaking, I was not.

“No, it’s not,” she sighed, “... and when you hear my story, you will understand why.”

She paused again, fixing her eyes on mine. “I am, or was at least, a prostitute, and I have been one since I was eighteen.”

Her words froze time for me, as if my mind could not accept the casual forthrightness with which those words had just emanated from such a beautiful lady as she. I was stunned, and it caused me to catch my breath.

She watched me closely, and I sensed that she was waiting for the inevitable reaction, the stereotyped cold rejection which stigmatizes those in this, ridiculously referred to as the *oldest profession on Earth*.

She did not look ashamed or contrite – there was no guilt on her face.

Her eyes were fixed on mine with firm determination.

And in that fleeting moment of silence between us, something else revealed itself through that veneer of beauty; I became distinctly aware that this woman

had experienced pain and suffering, and that she had a mission and that I was about to become a part of it.

I flipped my pad open and clicked a pen, and looked up at her, inviting her to continue. I know it sounds old-fashioned, a pad of paper and a pen in this age of hand-held devices, but I like making notes, circling important things, underlining points, and somehow, it helps me feel a connection to my clients.

I also placed my cell phone on the table.

"Is it okay if I record our talk?"

"Yes, of course," she responded with a somber look in her eyes that bordered on something else, something deep and troubling.

It was at that point that I noticed the tattoo on her arm. She caught me looking at it.

"We're marked, like property," she began with a sigh. "Our handlers tat their sign on us to mark who we belong to," she shrugged, "like cattle."

Another sigh escaped her lips, and I sensed a sea of emotion, trapped below.

"Where do you want me to start?"

"From the beginning," I answered, trying to maintain my equanimity, even though I still felt uneasy about being in a room with a woman who professed to be a member of ... well, you get it.

As she paused to collect her thoughts, I was suddenly challenging myself – *why had my attitude toward her suddenly shifted?* I knew nothing about this woman and yet, just because she had revealed herself to me, I was suddenly judgmental of her, as if I was entitled to marginalize her as a person, to relegate her to another pile as somehow lesser than myself?

And how was I to author her story if I was, in fact, already prejudicial?

It is the worst form of hypocrisy, a violation of the code of any author worth his or her salt. I had vowed to only write about those things I could lay claim to with a sense of moral conviction in my own life – and now, I had to do the same with her, or simply walk away.

As she looked me in the eyes, and as the words began to flow past her lips, I knew I had to hear her entire story. And frankly, I was entranced by both her forthrightness and the morale incomprehensibility of the tale I was about to hear.

I am good at conjuring up stories – my imagination knows no bounds, and my sense of entitlement when it comes to revealing the truth, not just fiction, has no limits. But the story she revealed was something that defied my creativity.

She painted a picture of her life, with such unadulterated specificity, that I felt myself drawn to her. It was a shockingly detailed account of a young girl,

with career-dreams, who had been snared against her will, and then trapped in the web of traffickers as a sex slave.

Her story began at the early age of seventeen, growing up on the west side amidst the upper middle-class of America. She was an honors-student, destined for a career in the legal arena; a fact which made the very irony and the despicable dichotomy of her life, as it now existed, even more tragic. Her father was an engineer for a large automotive maker, and her mother was a teacher in a school for special children.

Angelika had always walked a golden path in her life. She never knew danger, threat, or deprivation. She was not and had never been exposed to the world of criminality – living within the protective bubble around her. Unfortunately, her naivety contributed to her ultimate vulnerability.

And clearly, that naivety had been fostered and fed by a culture which fashioned the view of the world in the minds of young people, through social media – creating, in part, a delusive reality, as if everyone out there was a friend just waiting to impart great opportunities upon you.

In her final year at high school, she became friends with Naomi, a friendship which would come to change her in ways she could never have anticipated.

They met on social media, and what drew them together was not any societal bonds since their backgrounds were so diverse; because Naomi came from a poor part of town and was the third and oldest child of a single parent who struggled to keep food on the table for them. Despite their contrasts, Angelika found Naomi's rebellious attitude, her casual, cavalier mind-set, and her flippant disregard for rules, to be refreshing and invigorating – considering that she, Angelika, had always walked the middle of the road; moreover, what really caught Angelika's attention were Naomi's posts, parading images of herself in trending attire, and sometimes, very little.

As their friendship grew, they met at various restaurants, and it was during one of these meetups that Angelika asked the question she had wanted to ask for some time now.

"You're just a year older than me, how do you afford this lifestyle?"

"Escorting older men to social affairs," answered Naomi.

"That sounds like prostitution?" challenged Angelika.

Naomi smiled. "No silly. Prostitution is all about spreading your legs for any douchebag that comes along. The escort service is different. The agency shows us pictures of the client and info about them, and we decide if we want to engage them. If they want sex, they pay for that separately, and it is entirely up to us to negotiate the matter. No one forces you. Most of my clients just want the company. Businesspeople coming to town who want someone to talk to over dinner, or dance with at a club, or attend a ballet."

Angelika rolled her eyes. "Sounds like the same thing to me."

"Whatever! Judge me if you want, but I am of legal age; and besides, I am tired of being poor."

Although Angelika thought otherwise, she refrained from judging her friend because she felt it was unfair, coming from a family of plenty, whereas Naomi had lived a life with so little.

Unfortunately, it was a mistake for which she would pay dearly.

Naomi rarely spoke of her extracurricular activities, although Angelika noticed her expensive and fancy attire, her jewelry, and the extra cash which she carried and flaunted freely.

One day Naomi took it to the next level. "I know you don't agree with my lifestyle, but check this out," she slipped her a print-ad, one which called for teen models for a European fashion magazine."

Naomi smiled at her. "You could do that, you are beautiful. You could make some extra cash, and it is all above boards – just modeling."

Angelika eyed the paper suspiciously. "And this has nothing to do with what you do, escorting men?"

"No silly – it is just modeling. And besides, you've got a good set," she tipped her head at her bosom, "... why let them go to waste?" she said with an appraising eye at Angelika's breasts.

Angelika stared at the ad for a time. She had been looking for part-time work to make extra cash. She had plans to travel overseas to Europe for the summer, and it was time to stop leeching off her parents now that she had turned eighteen. "I'll check it out," she promised.

The modeling agency turned out to be legitimate – or at least it seemed so, and they readily invited her to try it out. They seemed nice and above boards, so she started working part-time.

Two nights a week she posed in various outfits - all of it aimed at promoting clothing styles to young adult women. After only two months she was offered the opportunity to model for more magazines which were published in Germany, France, Belgium, Russia, and the Czech Republic. She accepted, and the money was good – exceptionally good.

After several months, her modeling caught the attention of certain people in the industry, and she was invited to a special dinner.

There she was introduced to Legan, a Czech who headed up the teen-magazine empire for which she modeled.

Legan seemed to take a liking to her. He invited her to sit with him - wherein they ate and drank. As the evening progressed, she felt more-and-more-drowsy. He offered to drive her home and that was the last thing she

remembered before waking up the next morning in an empty hotel room, naked, and her entire body ached in all the wrong places.

Spasms of pain erupted from her loins, and she noticed blood spatters between her legs and something else – patches of a dried substance which clung to her skin like pasty glue. The utter morbid shock coursed her body, like a tidal wave and she covered her mouth as the urge to scream erupted from deep inside. And in that moment, she felt her entire world crashing around her, shattering into devastation, the remnants of a mortal battle, and one in which she had been the only victim.

I have to admit, as I listened to her story, that I felt both shock and rage at the animals who had so brutally raped her.

For days, she remained home, telling her mother and father that she did not feel well. In the solitude of her room, she vacillated between spasms of grief, anger, and outrage, as she tried to remember what had happened to her during her stupor. They had drugged her, she was sure of that, and even so, she still had only vague memories, like flashes of light in an utterly dark room, images of their faces, of them riding her like an animal, the occasional smack or punch to her body, the coarse sadistic and cruel laughter of the men who had raped her throughout the night.

Not only did she feel scared, but she also felt as if she had been cut to her very soul and with it, went her sense of self-confidence, her dignity, her belief in herself, and all that she hoped for seemed to be drowned by a sea of anguish, guilt, and uncontrollable despair.

What was worse was the fact that she could not remember any of their faces. Only the despicable and appalling fact that they had left her there, sore, bruised and covered with their scum; faceless cowards, thieves who had stolen her pride and her self-esteem.

When the trauma was abating, if only marginally, the next blow came when an envelope arrived in the mail. Her mother brought it to her with a concerned look on her face, for it seemed that mothers could always sense the subtleties which others could not.

Angelika offered a fleeting smile as she took the letter, retreated to her room, and promptly opened the envelope, gaping with unabated shock at the photos.

Tears pooled into her eyes, and for the first time, she saw what they had done to her, that night, images which horrified her and would haunt her for years to come.

When she finally managed to reign-in her emotions, she read the unsigned note inside: TELL ANYONE ABOUT THIS AND WE WILL HURT YOUR FAMILY.

Within a week the axe was dropped yet again, with a phone call, informing her that she was to start escorting certain clients, those who specifically wanted a girl of her caliber and age; and failing to do so, she knew the consequences.

As I listened to her words, trying as I did to remain distanced, trying to maintain my perspective as the ghostwriter, I could not help but empathize with her as a human being. I felt her agony, her pain – and the utter sense of hopelessness she had felt at that time; the sheer despair at realizing that her life had been hijacked and that what faced her was a very dark and bleak road.

From there, the story which she described was predictable, but no less disturbing – as these people systematically extorted her, forcing a perfectly normal and aspiring young girl into a life of abnormality.

Under repeated threats of harm to her family, Angelika was leveraged into providing escort services for select clientele, which, perforce, usually included giving sexual services.

The extortion took hold, and like invisible chains shackling her, she could do little more than acquiesce to her new masters. Out of necessity to protect her family, and to keep her double life a secret, she moved from her family's home to her own apartment on the other side of town, assuring everyone that she was making good money with modeling and could support herself.

Nonetheless, the arguments were many, the incisive questioning was unending, and finally, out of sheer love for her parents and her younger sister, Angelika distanced herself – and she hated herself for doing so.

As to be expected, escorting men was just a euphemism for prostitution.

One man became just a blur of countless others, each of them interested, in the end, in only one thing – personal entitlement to the sexual liberties for which they paid, and for which she was extorted to deliver.

It was degradation to the extreme – for there was no win, no gain, no joy, no satisfaction – and certainly no future in her new-found slavery.

After a year, Angelika started taking drugs to numb her pain. Her handlers were of course happy to provide her with such because a drug-dependent hooker was a more malleable one, forced to cling to their meager existence to get their next fix.

After two years, her life was a shambles. She had lost track of any sense of pride. She rarely spoke to her family, usually only by phone, and refused to engage them in anything meaningful - except an occasional and short visit to assure them that she was not dead.

Naomi was her only real friend and a weak one at that – for she too had spiraled into the inevitable trap which the sex industry created.

Hooked to drugs, prostitution and a corrupted life, Naomi was a mere shadow of the person she had once been. When they did meet, briefly at that, Naomi only spoke of drugs, her next fix, the hatred she felt towards her handler and all of it with a dismal look in her face, the same one that a prisoner on death row might have as they faced their ultimate end.

Nearing the third year of sexual captivity, she woke up one early morning to the ringing of her cell phone. It was Naomi's mother.

Angelika raced to the morgue and cried uncontrollably over the body of her friend, whose face had been savagely and repeatedly beaten to the point of no-recognition.

Naomi had been found in a field, discarded like mere trash.

It was then, as she stood there looking at the defiled body of her friend, that she knew her destiny resided in that same field and that she must either change her life or face the inevitable.

Curt, her handler, or pimp as they are historically referred to, would visit her regularly, bringing her a new supply of cocaine, and reminding her, as always, that he held the ace card.

Fear was the potent factor most used to control the girls – and Curt, a large beast of a man with a short and violent temperament, had unleashed it on her more than once, reasserting his position as the alpha-male.

Angelika knew that if she was to beat the system, the first hurdle to overcome was her addiction.

Over the next many weeks, she weaned herself, painfully so, off the cocaine - taking incrementally less and less doses. And then one day, she took the leap of faith and went cold-turkey, one of the most excruciating experiences of her life. The anguishing pain and the sense that every cell in her body was about to rip apart was only feebly overcome by forcing herself to remember the image of Naomi's dead and battered body; her lifeless face, the contusions and black and blue bruises which defiled her, was the only thing that Angelika held onto as the pain wracked her for what seemed endless hours.

When she awoke the next morning, she was covered in a film of dirty sweat, and was lying in a pool of her own vomit. But she had won the battle.

Her experiences engaged me so deeply, that there were times when I could do little more than just stare at her – that such a woman had endured all of this in just the past few years. I marveled at the power of the human soul to rebound despite anything.

Most of the time during her narrative, she sat with her chin on her hand, gazing out the window at the small decadent parking lot below.

Sometimes she would pause, long pauses, where it seemed as if she were trying to find herself in the battle which waged inside her head. Although she

never got into the sordid details of her sexual encounters, she did relate various times when clients had beaten her. Men – or even groups of men – sadistic creatures who used her body as something to satiate their degraded fantasies and who left her bleeding and bruised, like something less than human.

Despite the hunger pangs and my discomfort at sitting in the same chair for so many hours, I would not, could not, find the means to break away. Such a story deserved utter respect, and I would stay with her until she was done.

When she did finally come to the end, she turned her head with a slight smile on her lips. “That’s it. Shocked?”

“Nah, I hear stories like this all the time,” I joked.

“I’m sure,” she said with a playful grin – her face more relaxed after her long narrative.

“You realize that by writing your story it is likely to cause complications for you?”

“I know. I have tried to think of every scenario, but in the end, there is only one way for me to be free of all of this.” She looked at me with her large brown eyes. “I must tell the truth. I must tell it all and I have to do it now.”

“And telling the police, wouldn’t that help?”

Her head wagged forcefully. “There’s no proof. These creeps can just deny everything and say it is my word against theirs.” Her lips tightened. “Besides, statistically speaking, girls in my situation usually end up dead in an alley when they flap their lips to the authorities. I have to think about my family’s safety too.”

“I admire you.”

“Don’t! There is nothing admirable about what I am or what I have done.”

“We all fall down, Angelika. What counts is whether we get back up again.”

She turned to look out the window with a forlorn and empty look, like that of a child staring despondently at a dimly rainy day.

“Prostitution cuts a deep scar in the soul – it doesn’t disappear that easy, if ever,” she said, in a whisper.

“What will you do now?”

She turned and looked me firmly in the eyes. “I’m leaving town tonight.”

“Where will you go?”

“It’s better that you don’t know, for your own safety.”

“Won’t they come after you?”

“They will try.”

I tilted my head. “They won’t just let you go that easily.”

"No, they won't." Her words trailed off leaving a ghostly silence in the room. She tipped an eye my way. "Don't worry about me – just write and publish the story, if you can."

"I don't think there will be any problem finding someone interested in publishing it, but even so, I can also self-publish it."

She smiled.

"Will you do me a favor?" I asked.

She nodded.

"If you need any help at all, call me! And I mean that!"

"Are you so sure you want to get mixed up with a gal like me?"

"I'll take my chances."

Her lips suddenly trembled as small tears rolled down her face. She leaned forward and kissed me on the cheek. "Thank you for caring," she whispered.

I realized then that I was the only person in her life who believed in her.

I no longer saw her as a prostitute, nor even as a victim, but as a champion – someone who was taking a stand against these criminals.

Before I left, she handed me a USB drive containing photos and information about her life – granting me the right to use them as I saw fit for the book.

As I stepped into my car, I looked up at her room. She was watching me through the window. Twilight had set in, its dim light casting a somber hue over the city, adding even more sobriety to my mood.

As she looked down at me, someone I had never met until this very day, I somehow felt closer to her than any other human being in the world.

I spent many days sifting through the material on the USB, and photos, photos of her before she became what she became, and photos of the world she had lived in for the past years.

When a year had passed, and with no word from her and no way of finding her, I concluded that the book would have to be published without the closing chapter – the happy conclusion I had hoped to hear.

It was a sobering day for me when I reconciled to do so, for it meant that Angelika might not have survived the ordeal and that while her story would be a legacy of her life, it would be incomplete.

I called my publishing agent and set up a meeting for the next day, but as irony would have it, I received a text message early the same morning which read:

"Meet me at Starbucks on Elm St, 10 a.m. – A."

Like a kid effusing uncontrolled excitement, I raced to that Starbucks and waited anxiously, filled with trepidation for fear that something might go wrong.

Every second ticked by with a resounding hammering inside my head.

When the door to the coffee shop opened it was like a balmy summer wind gusting in – with a refreshing scent of lavender and a warming sensation which calmed me.

Her face was radiant, her eyes had a new and vibrant glow and her hair shimmered in the light. Her body had filled out, and though no less shapely, she looked like an entirely different person.

Like a classic Monet on a Parisian summer day, she was wearing a gauzy summer dress that lightly flagged in the wind, dark sunglasses and nominal make-up, and her skin was smooth as butter.

I stood and held out my hand, but she wrapped her arms around me and hugged me tight.

“Did you publish it yet?” she asked.

“Ironically, I was heading to my publisher today.”

“Do you want to hear the end of my story?” she asked with a tease in her eye.

I laughed aloud. “Are you kidding! I have been waiting for this moment for a year!”

Over coffee and pastry, she related the entire story of the past year, from the moment when I had last seen her. It was both agonizingly shocking and a relief to hear the outcome.

Not more than an hour after I left her at the motel that Sunday evening, Curt, her “handler,” showed up unexpectedly. Of course, it was the precise thing she had hoped would not happen, and for that reason, it did. The Universe had a perverse sense of humor at times.

Angelika had already packed her meager belongings and was about to make her run, but unfortunately, with the two-hundred and fifty-pound drunk pimp blocking her way, she had no choice but to deal with him.

Despite his low IQ, the man figured out her intentions.

He swaggered toward her, grabbed, and punched her to the bed. Then he began clawing at her clothes, ripping at them like a wild dog.

She resisted, fighting back, but his sheer size and strength overwhelmed her.

As he fumbled to undo his pants and groped for his underwear, Angelika rolled off the bed and reached for her purse. The drunken hulk stumbled at her, and as he did, she turned and struck him in his exposed groin with the full force of her right heel. He dropped to the floor, moaning and then began ranting that he would kill her. As he came off the floor at her, she pulled the .45 from her purse, cocked the trigger and aimed it directly into his face.

Curt froze.

The only words she said to him, and I swear the air around me chilled as I listened to her saying them now, *"If I ever see you again, I will put a bullet in your head. And if you touch my family I will not stop until you are dead."*

She hailed a cab, went to the airport, and before entering the terminal she dropped the gun down a water drain.

She began her new life, under a new identity. She got a job at a local law agency, doing menial office work, eventually working herself up to secretarial level, while taking night classes in law and jurisprudence.

True to their character, the traffickers did come after her – asking around, looking for her whereabouts.

A friend informed her that Curt had been dropping threats that he would make a move on her family if she did not come back.

"This is when I had to get smart," she said with a slight flick of her brows as she sipped her coffee. "You see, two can play this game called extortion. Curt and Legan have a basic flaw in their characters – they are arrogant men, and that arrogance makes them blind and stupid." She leaned back.

"So, what did you do?"

"By this time, I had made friends at the law firm, one of them taking a more intimate interest in me and my story. He helped me to hire a good private investigator."

I anxiously awaited the punch line.

"That PI turned out to be the best investment I ever made. He came back to me with enough evidence to expose their dirty little secrets. Photos of sex with minors, evidence of human trafficking and prostitution rings – using the teen-magazine modeling platform as a front group to lure girls into their net, not only here, but overseas."

"And?"

"We turned all the information over to the FBI – and together with other foreign law enforcement agencies, primarily Europol, they used my information to close the net on Legan and his groupies. As we speak, they are heading for a prison term and his teen mag empire has been shut down."

"Wow. Quite a story."

We sat in silence. A dozen questions were buzzing around my head, like flies in a jar, so I plucked the one that seemed most relevant.

"What about your family – are you going to hook up again?"

"It's a sensitive process," she wagged her head with a heavy sigh. "I burned that bridge, and now, I am slowly repairing the damage. Of course, they feel betrayed that I never came to them for help, whereas I did the only thing I could to ensure their safety." She flicked a brow. "C'est la vie, uh?!"

My silence invited her to speak, and frankly, I just did not want to end the moment.

"It's so easy for people to be an armchair critic in hindsight, to say, 'Why didn't you ask us for help?' or 'Why didn't you go to the police?' and unless you have been there, felt those invisible chains holding you down, it is quite impossible to impart the feeling of being enslaved and why it is so hard to break away."

A transient wave of anger flashed through her eyes, like lightning across the sky.

As she spoke, her words were toxic. "People like Legan and Curt are sub-human," she hissed. "They have lost all relativity to any moral compass or principles or in fact, the very qualities which make us people - but they know how to manipulate, like rats, they can find their way through the systems and tunnels of human intercourse."

She paused with a sober look on her face and then looked at me with a renewed smile which dispelled the emotions still coursing through her. "In any case, it is my parents who must come to terms with the matter. I faced my demons already. It is over for me and there is nothing I can do to change the past – but I know, and I am hopeful that with the book, that I can make a difference for others."

One question remained unanswered for me.

"Would you have pulled the trigger on Curt?"

Her eyes transitioned from bright to dark in a split-second, and for a moment she relived the moment. After a time, she looked up at me. "I would have put a bullet in him if he had tried to stop me - absolutely."

She reached into her handbag and pulled out a check and handed it to me.

"I didn't expect to be paid for this," I said, pushing it back across the table.

She gently edged it back my way. "You do not understand. If it was not for you, I might not be alive today."

I was confused, and clearly, she saw it in my face.

She stared into her coffee cup as she spoke.

"There were sleepless nights when I wondered if I would ever wake up alive, or if they would find and kill me in my sleep. My only satisfaction, and the only anchor I had to latch onto, was the hope that you would get my story out there." Her eyes were shining as she said this, and they brimmed with tears, but not tears of sadness.

We finally bridged off the subject, spoke about her plans to move up the pecking order in the law firm and eventually practice law, and when there was nothing more to be said, she gave me her business card, we hugged, and she left the coffee shop.

There was no further talk about the book. No talk of royalties. Nothing. She trusted me to deal with it all.

I sat there for a long time.

I honestly could not remember a period in my entire life when I felt so complete, when two ends of a large circle came together with perfection – like Ying and Yang.

Three months later, the book was published, and several months after that, it was already on its third reprint and heading for the New York Times best-seller list; and I had been contacted by movie agents who wanted the rights for a film production.

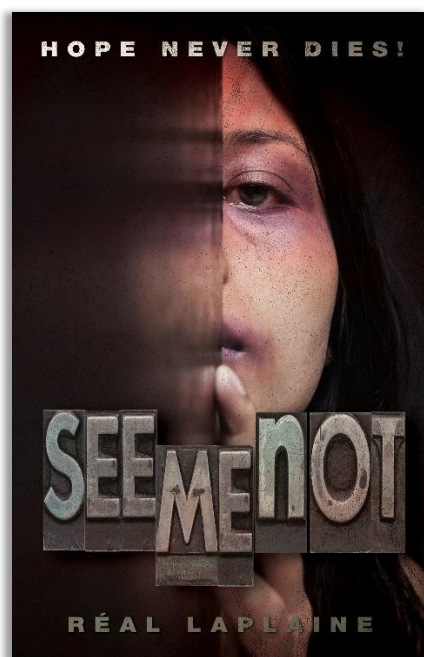
As a final anecdote, Angelika sent me a letter – with another check inside. It read:

"Please take this check to Naomi's mother, with a copy of the book. Tell her that it is better that she knows the truth about her daughter, because truth is the only thing that can free us from the past. I learned that the hard way. - Angelika."

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