

NORMAN HALL

# THE AWAKENING

The Sequel to *Good Girl*

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ISBN 9781091270633

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*For all the Jessica Anne Khalids  
in the world.*

## AUTHOR'S PREFACE

*The Awakening* is the sequel to my debut novel, *Good Girl*, published earlier this year. If you haven't read *Good Girl* then I suggest you do so, because the two novels go together.

However, I appreciate you may have just stumbled across *The Awakening* and, if you have, you might be confused if you don't know what happened before.

So, for those who haven't read *Good Girl* and want to dive straight in, I have provided a short reprise. Those who have can skip the next bit.

## REPRISE OF *GOOD GIRL*

In the first novel, we are introduced to Jessica Anne Khalid, twenty-three years old and destitute. Abused as a teenager by her father, and seeking sanctuary from a torrid life at home, she falls under the spell of Pakistani cab driver Mohammed Khalid, marries him at seventeen and, at eighteen, gives birth to daughter Leila. She is yet to discover that Mo is not only a member of a child sex-grooming gang, he is also a drug dealer and inveterate gambler.

Over time, Mo's nefarious activities get him into serious debt and, with it, trouble. Fearing for his life, he flees to Pakistan, taking four-year-old Leila with him and leaving Jess with all his debts. With no family, and now faced with eviction and bankruptcy, Jess abandons what little she has left and disappears.

After two or three weeks spent sleeping rough, she finds a job with accommodation in a canal-side pub. She assumes a new identity as "Alice", but the lecherous landlord, Dave, has designs on her, and his unwelcome advances turn eventually to sexual assault. Traumatized by the behaviour of yet another man, she flees, unaware she is pregnant with twins.

While Jess's life lurches from crisis to crisis, seventy-year-old retired army officer Peter Jeffries is still coming to terms with the twin tragedies of losing his young wife to leukaemia and the disappearance of his daughter, Lisa. Lisa had found it impossible to cope with her mother's premature death and sought solace by taking a gap-year in Nepal, but goes missing after being caught up in a severe earthquake. Peter blames himself for Lisa's disappearance, believing he failed to show her the love and support she needed. Having

travelled to Nepal in a futile bid to find her, he now presumes her dead.

When Jess and Peter meet by chance, she unwittingly takes on the role of surrogate daughter, unaware that she bears a striking resemblance to Lisa. Peter believes he has been blessed with a second chance and resolves to make amends for his failings with his own daughter. When Jess confesses her terrible past and he realises that she too has lost someone she loves, Peter secretly resolves to find Leila and return her to her mother.

Three years pass and, weakened by long-term illness, Peter receives the news that Leila has finally been found. But before Leila can be reunited with Jess, Peter dies, leaving Jess and her daughters everything in his will, unaware that his own daughter, Lisa, is in fact still alive.

So now, read on ...



# THE AWAKENING



## CHAPTER 1

Sujay Bahadur Gurung stood patiently on the edge of the trail, gaze fixed on the lone figure standing on a ridge a hundred metres away.

As ever, and almost since the beginning of time, the towering presence of 7,227-metre-high Langtang Lirung loomed large over the valley, and he saw that even now, the evidence of the mayhem and destruction the mountain had rained down upon the old village of Langtang remained indelible. A vast area of barren rock and scree sloped three kilometres down from its peak and spread itself across the valley, beneath which still lay the ruins of a small town and the bodies of most of its inhabitants. It was a stark and poignant reminder of the scale of the disaster and the annihilation of a community that, even after five years, not a single shrub, weed, sprig or blade of grass could permeate the blanket of stone.

The sole building to have survived the landslide, protected from the millions of tons of falling rock by an overhanging cliff, still stood as a sentinel, marking the grave of Langtang like a giant tombstone.

Sujay had been here many times before and wondered if, when and how this cruel manifestation of death might eventually spawn new life and perhaps gradually ease the pain of the past. Nature had been slow on the uptake, it appeared to him. In contrast, and despite the magnitude of the disaster, man's indomitable spirit had been resolute, and every time he came, he saw that the new village of Langtang, sited two hundred metres away under the protection of solid cliffs at the base of the mountain, had grown yet another hut, shack or barn.

There were new teahouses too, servicing the steadily increasing number of trekkers, some returning to a site they had visited in the past, others simply there out of morbid curiosity; sightseers of the infamous. But for whatever reason they came, all were welcome. They brought their money; income the new population of Langtang badly needed.

Sujay lowered his charge's rucksack to the ground. This visit was especially poignant for him, almost a repeat of the trip he'd made five years ago with the elderly Colonel Jeffries, although the circumstances could not be more different. He was still coming to terms with the consequences of his journey to England four months previously and remained unsure where they would lead.

He watched the young woman standing motionless on the ridge, hands in the pockets of her stylish and expensive red trekking jacket, staring out across the valley at the desolation below her. The likeness was remarkable and the circumstances bizarre, and he would like to know more about her and her motivation in coming here, but there would be plenty of time for that in the days ahead. He was not naturally inquisitive about his clients, being unremittingly courteous and respectful of their privacy, but the situation was highly unusual. He'd played a significant part in a saga that, for him, still held many unanswered questions.

But for now, as ever, the focus of his attention was the journey ahead and the distance they still had to travel. He checked his watch: 1.15 p.m. He would give her another minute or two before they rejoined the trail. They'd stop for lunch soon and then it would be three more hours to the place where they'd spend their third night. Perhaps she might be more inclined to unburden some of her thoughts now she'd been to see for herself.

The young woman standing alone on the ridge overlooking the Langtang Valley examined the desolate landscape that stretched out below her and she felt a wave of dismay and sadness rising from within. She tried to imagine what force of nature could possibly, without warning, have brought the entire side of a mountain down onto the heads of the unsuspecting villagers and at such speed that afforded them no time to get to safety. It was beyond her comprehension.

She saw figures moving around in the new settlement to the east and felt wonder at their resilience, awe at their determination to start again, admiration for their refusal to give up. She wondered who they were and how they lived their lives.

She thought of Peter standing here and the despair he must have felt looking down on the same scene, realising that his beloved Lisa was in all probability somewhere down there under the rubble and gone forever. She could hear him, even now.

*“I have to believe she’s dead. But I can’t be certain. I just hope wherever she is, she’s at peace.”*

She swallowed deeply and choked back a tear as she recalled his words back in the garden at Chalton. But the tear was not for Lisa. It was for Peter. *If only he were with me now.* She looked down at her feet and noticed footprints made by hiking boots just like hers, and she wondered whether any of them were Peter’s. It was five years ago. Surely not?

Jessica Anne Jeffries drew a deep breath of cool Himalayan air through her nostrils, held it for a moment and, with eyes closed, exhaled slowly until her lungs were empty. She remained motionless for a few seconds until her body demanded oxygen, so she opened her mouth and, with eyes glassy and moist, began to breathe normally again. Her moment of contemplation was interrupted by a plaintive call coming from a hundred metres away.

“Miss Jess, I think we must be going now!”

Jess turned her head at the sound and saw Sujay's arm held high, hat in his hand, waving at her. She waved back in acknowledgement. It was not over. Not by a long way. The search for the truth had started four months ago, the day Leila had returned, and she would not rest until she knew. She took a last look at the valley and walked slowly back to the trail, where her Nepalese guide was waiting for her.

## CHAPTER 2

The day Leila came home was the happiest day of Jess's life. After her daughter had been taken, it seemed to Jess that all life had stopped. In the aftermath of Leila's disappearance five years previously, all the other elements that made up Jess's miserable world had quickly unravelled, and although it seemed at the time there was little hope of ever seeing her daughter, giving up had never been an option. The determination to carry on, regardless of any hope of success, eventually led her down the path that reunited her with Leila.

When the hugs and kisses and tears and euphoria in the garden subsided, they all went indoors for tea and celebrations. Sophie and Lucy were thrilled to meet their new sister, even though they couldn't properly comprehend what that meant or who she was. They shrieked and screamed with delight and ran around the house as if possessed, and Leila, despite being five years older than them, joined in the games with gusto. Jess was similarly hyperactive, constantly jumping up from the kitchen table to see where the girls had gone and what they were up to, seemingly unable to let Leila out of her sight for more than a minute or two.

She repeatedly led them back into the kitchen and sat them down with the adults, who calmly sipped tea amidst the chaos, but within seconds the girls were off again, chasing each other from room to room, clutching their favourite teddies and shouting at the top of their high-pitched voices.

Jess had a thousand things to ask, but her brain was still buzzing from Michael's revelations earlier that afternoon. She babbled incoherently, throwing questions at him without waiting for answers, until he decided she was not in a fit

state to absorb any information, nor would she be for some time to come.

“Jess,” he said in his distinctive, calm and rational manner, his comforting voice somehow rising above the mayhem that was going on around them. “I suggest you take some time to let the dust settle. Get to know your daughter again. None of us can appreciate the trauma she may have experienced over the last four or five years and how that might manifest itself in the coming days.” Jess looked up towards the kitchen doorway that led to the hall. She could still hear the girls playing and their squeals echoing around the house. The feverish and edgy manner she’d been unable to moderate slowly relaxed as Michael continued.

“You should be prepared for some emotional fallout as Leila adjusts to her new surroundings. Remember that only twenty-four hours ago she was immersed in the madness of Kathmandu with people she didn’t know and little understanding of what was happening to her.” Jess lowered her eyes as new and darker thoughts began to whirl around inside her head. Emma moved to the chair next to her and took her hand. It was cold and shaking.

“I shall have to get used to calling you Jess in future,” she said with a kindly smile. “Unless, of course, you prefer otherwise.”

Jess looked up at her ruefully.

“No. That’s fine, either will do. The twins think I’m Alice. That was the only name Peter ever used, so I guess I’ll be stuck with it for a while yet.” But as she spoke, it began to dawn on her that the road ahead might be fraught with difficulties. It was tempting to think that now, all was right with the world, and this was another exciting new beginning on a journey that would take them who knows where? Despite her elation, she knew that she needed Peter’s towering strength to help her more than ever, and realised how terribly she missed him. But Peter was gone, and whatever she had to do, she would have to do it herself.

“You know, Jess,” said Emma. “We were never blessed with children and sometimes it’s been a matter of great regret, for me at least.” She turned to Michael who smiled fondly back at her. “It never happened for us. It wasn’t to be. But despite all the bad things that happened to you, I hope you’ll appreciate how lucky you are and that you’ve so much to look forward to. And of that, I confess to being insanely jealous.” Jess looked up at her, worried for a moment that, for the first time ever, Emma might be about to weep all over her. “We’ll be here to help you in any way we can. Be in no doubt about that.” Jess flung her arms around her, and Emma stiffened slightly but then gently patted Jess’s back in response.

“We are going to leave you to it,” announced Michael, putting his mug down and getting to his feet. “I’ll come back in a few days and we’ll have a chat about things, but if you need anything, anything at all, just call. Any hour of the day or night. Promise?”

“Promise,” said Jess, and she stood up just as Lucy ran into the kitchen.

“Mummy! Mummy! Leila’s caught a mouse!”

“Oh my God!” gasped Emma, leaping up from her chair, nervously clutching the pearls around her neck. “Michael! Go and deal with it immediately!” Michael shrugged, giving the impression that in this particular matter he might be somewhat out of his comfort zone.

“Don’t worry about it,” said Jess calmly, pleased they had all been brought back down to earth, at least for a moment. “We get them now and again. I think it’s time we got ourselves a cat.” Michael sighed with apparent relief; his pest control services might not be required. But Emma wasn’t convinced the danger had passed and she was right, as usual, as Leila came bounding into the kitchen, hands clasped together, with Sophie in hot pursuit.

Leila stopped in front of the women as Emma leaned back instinctively, lips pursed, eyes wide in trepidation. Leila held up her hands and, with a smile of delight, opened

them to reveal a small brown furry animal sitting up in the palm of one hand, whiskers twitching and tiny chest heaving. But it was only for a second as Emma, having feared the worst, whimpered and recoiled, her sudden movement spurring the rodent into action. It leapt a foot in the air out of Leila's hand, and landed on the kitchen table, hopping and skipping down to the far end as fast as its little legs could carry it.

Emma's terror was complete. She screamed like a banshee and the twins joined in, running in circles around the table, squealing with excitement, and then crawling underneath it in pursuit of the mouse.

"Michael! Michael!" Emma shrieked at her husband who remained calm but unclear as to what he should do, as his wife hopped manically from one foot to the other. Without making a sound Leila dropped to the floor and joined the twins under the table, but within a second they all reappeared, charging out of the kitchen and continuing the chase down the hallway. "Oh ... Oh!" moaned Emma, still shaking and twitching, and it was Jess's turn to comfort her with a hand on the shoulder.

"They're harmless," she said, hands on hips. "Nothing to worry about."

"Michael! Go out there and check it's gone." Michael, dutiful as ever, did his wife's bidding. He was back in a moment.

"They've all gone upstairs. Quick, while the coast is clear." He winked at Jess as Emma tottered out of the kitchen on tiptoes, holding her skirt up above her knees. Jess went up to him and threw her arms round his neck.

"Thank you," she said quietly in his ear, "for everything."

"I'll call you tomorrow. Don't hesitate," he ordered, pointing at her as he shuffled backwards out to the hallway.

"I won't."

"Michael!" Jess heard Emma's summons from the other end of the hall and she smiled before she heard the main door shut with a loud thud, and for a moment the silence



engulfed her. Then came the distant cries from upstairs, summoning, impatient, demanding.

“Mummy! Mummy! *Mummy!*” She shook her head and put her brain back into gear.

“Coming,” she shouted and set off at a run.

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