



## The Awakening

by Angela Hunt

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I am curled up in the library, my feet tucked beneath me on the velveteen loveseat, a chenille throw wrapped around my shoulders. A single lamp burns on the library table, casting a golden glow over the bookcase lined with leather-bound classics. Our largest TV (a whopping seventeen inches) nestles amid the books on a shelf. Because Mother always thought it the height of bad taste to place a television in the living room, our largest set has been banished to this former servant's chamber, an arrangement that suits me. The library is cozier than the living room, and I have always felt at home among books.

I press the button on the remote, then frown as the screen fills with the image of O.J. Simpson seated at a table with a man in a suit. I *know* this scene; virtually everyone in America watched portions of Simpson's murder trial. I squint at the TV, trying to remember who served as Simpson's lawyer. At the instant the name occurs to me—Johnny Cochran—my mother drifts into the room.

My stomach drops. The empty place in my middle fills with a terrifying hollowness as Mother stares at the television, one hand plucking at her short summer nightgown, the other quivering as she points to the screen.

"I know that man," she says, her eyes focused on the TV. "He came to one of our dinner parties last year."

My hands are slick with sweat, yet my mind has gone cold and sharp, focused on what *cannot* be happening. My mother is dead; I don't believe in ghosts, so this *must* be a dream.

But it feels real.

"No, Mother." I answer in the flat, high-pitched voice of fear. "That's Johnny Cochran. He's never been to our home."

"I'm sure he has." The voice which used to dominate Manhattan's finest living rooms and dining tables is velvet edged with steel. "You don't remember, Aurora, because your nose is always stuck in a book."

Trembling, I pick up the remote and press the power off. Years of living with a dementia patient have taught me not to argue.

When the screen goes dark, she looks at me. "I must speak with you."

Dream or not, I can't resist the force of her personality. Under the pressure of her burning gaze, I lower my feet from the furniture. "Is there a problem?"

"You threw out my eyeglasses."

"I haven't seen your glasses, Mother."

"You're always throwing them out. I always leave them on the desk in the living room, but they're not there."

"I would never throw anything of yours away. You've misplaced them, that's all."

"I am not stupid." She lifts one eyebrow, suggesting in maternal shorthand that I have committed a major transgression. "I suggest you get off my loveseat and get busy finding my glasses."

"I will get up, Mother," I say, standing, "and I will help you find your glasses."

The thin line of her mouth clamps tight, then the soft flesh at her throat ripples as she swallows. "You hate me." Tears well within her blue eyes. "You want me dead."

"No, Mother, I don't."

"You love your pig of a father more than me!"

"Mother—"

"You are trying to kill me!"

"That's enough, Mother."

I take her arm, amazed at how solid she feels in my grip. Now I can be firm with her, unlike the early days when I suffered from the mistaken belief that I could allow her to remain in control. "Come, Mother, let me take you back to your room."

"No!" Her expression twists, the dignified veneer peeling away to reveal unreasoning terror underneath. I am still holding her arm so she whirls toward me, slapping at my shoulders, my head, my cheeks . . .

"Mother!"

She is screaming now, cursing as expertly as a football coach. I bring one hand up to shield my face and tug at her with the other, but she resists, slapping and spewing invectives while she leans in the opposite direction. Her bare feet will not slide over

the wooden floors, so when I pull her forward she loses her balance, one frightened cry escaping her lips before she upsets a painting and hits her head on the edge of a table in the gallery—

The force of her fall yanks her arm from my grip. I turn in time to see her eyes close, her mouth go slack, and her feet slide out from under her.

“Mother?”

She is silent, lying on the floor, one arm extended toward me, the other curled beneath her cheek. I kneel beside her, fear blowing down the back of my neck as I slip my hand beneath her head. “Mother?”

Her eyes move beneath her paper-thin lids, then grow still as a small gasp escapes her lips. When I pull my hand free, a red smear adorns my palm.

Fear and anger have knotted inside me. “Mom?”

Her eyelids lift; she looks at me with triumph in her gaze. Her hand, bony and sharp, rises to snap around my wrist like a manacle. While I struggle to escape her grip, her thin frame wrinkles and shrivels and contracts in upon itself. Her face, which retained a measure of loveliness even in her illness, goes the color of gray thunderclouds while her lustrous hair stiffens to the texture of straw. But her eyes stay focused on me, hot and bright, until they finally cloud over, empty, and pop like crystalline egg shells.

I back away, my hands over my mouth, as her body disintegrates and a voice inside my head repeats, *this is a dream, not real, only a dream*, but I was touching her, hearing her, she was *here*—

I close my eyes to escape the horror, and when I open them again I am alone in the library, an old episode of *Friends* is playing on the television and the comforting hiss of the radiator beneath the window reminds me that it is autumn, not summer. I inhale deeply and as the air rushes through my airways I can taste autumn and wool and the lemon Pledge I used to dust the shelves a few hours ago.

I swing my feet to the floor, lean forward, and hesitate in my bent position. I’ve been dreaming, that’s all. My subconscious has been overloaded with emotions and memories that couldn’t help but spill out when I fell asleep.

I stand and look in the small mirror on the wall above the library table. My eyes are bloodshot, my hair frazzled. I should go to bed. Tomorrow, as Clara often says, will take care of itself.

I switch off the lamp, then turn to shut the door behind me. I don’t know why I keep closing the interior doors—probably because Mother insisted on tidy habits. In the

hallway, I notice that Mother's prized Jonathan Green painting has tilted. I reach out and touch the edge, nudging it forward, then frown when my fingers glide over the gallery table and encounter dampness.

I bring my hand into the glow of the gallery chandelier and the muscles of my throat move in a convulsive swallow.

My fingertips are wet with blood.

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