



TILL DEATH  
DO US PART  
OR ELSE

Stef Lochard

# Till Death Do Us Part . . . Or Else

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Eloquent Books

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*I dedicate this book to my mother,  
who has always believed in me.  
Thank you, Mom.*



# Prologue

She groaned and raised her right hand to her forehead as her eyes opened to an extraordinarily bright light, but closed them right away, wincing as its intensity only made her migraine worse. She could feel something rough against the skin of her hands when she grabbed hold of the coarse material beneath her and rolled to her side. Her arms were unstable and shaking as she gradually pushed herself up to a sitting position. While she shifted, the bumpy cushion she'd been laying on made a squeaky noise that rang in her ears like nails on a chalkboard.

With her head bent down and away from the light, she made another attempt at opening her eyes. This time there was no blinding light shooting rays of torturous pain into her head. She sought to focus on the ground spinning below her, but the blurry image of a young girl walking over to a blue car briefly flashed into her mind. Her face was shadowy, but her short blond hair was visibly pointing out from below an orange and white cap. The girl was wearing an orange and white vest over a white T-shirt, old blue jeans and sneakers. Her right hand was inside a book bag.

In a split second the flashback was gone and then back again, this time the girl was closer to the car than before. The split-second images continued until the girl had reached the car door, unlocked it and sat down in the driver's side. She turned the key in the ignition and then there was nothing but darkness. As quickly as they had come, the images were gone and she was now just staring at a jagged cement floor.

She looked up and around the room, a look of utter puzzlement on her face as she tried to figure out where she was. The only light in the room was the one that hung above her. Although the light had seemed bright when she had first opened her eyes, it only faintly lit the room.

The only piece of furniture—the only anything in the room period—was the bed she now sat on. It stood against the far wall in the right-hand corner. The walls were made of the same jagged cement as the floor and enclosed in shadows.

The front half of the room was cloaked in darkness, but she managed to distinguish a faint outline of a door. Using the bed as a support, arms still shaking, she made an attempt to stand up. Her legs wobbled and she fell back. The drugs that her captor had used to subdue her made her feel lightheaded and unstable.

Looking down, she noticed she was wearing the same sneakers as the girl in those images. Her eyes then caught sight of the orange vest and old blue jeans. The last image that came to her a moment ago, the one of the girl turning the key in the ignition came back and this time she had a face. It was her—she was the one walking to the car.

She closed her eyes, hoping to remember more of how she came to be in this place, but nothing came to mind. All she could remember was the hair standing up at the back of her neck and her whole body tensing up right before it all went dark.

She made a second attempt to stand up—this time successfully. The room spun around her and she stuck her arms out to use as a shield when she walked towards what was quickly coming into focus as the door. There was no doorknob, rather a handle. When she tried to pull the door open, it didn't even budge.

“Hello? Can anyone hear me? Hello? Please help me!” She yelled as she banged on the door. “Hello? Somebody! Help me please!” She continued to bang on the door.

Suddenly the light went out and she found herself in complete darkness. A deep fear coursed through her veins and she could feel her body begin to shake—not out of instability, rather from the dread she felt. Her head was clearer now and she'd

seen enough scary movies to realize that this was no high school prank.

It was obvious that someone had somehow taken her and was holding her hostage. The first thought that came to her head was why she was being held captive. Was she being held for some kind of ransom or for...something else? The former seemed very unlikely since her parents had no money and were considered to be lower class. The latter—it frightened her beyond comprehension—was the more likely event in question.

Tears formed in her eyes and her bottom lip trembled as she turned around and slid down to the floor. She stared straight ahead at the nothingness ahead of her and fought back the panic that had begun to set in.

After taking in several deep breaths in order to calm herself down, she stood up and made her way in the dark back to the bed. She walked slowly, again with her arms out. Once she reached the bed, she lay down on her side so that she was facing the door. She wiped the tears from her eyes and struggled to even her breathing. Her priority was figuring a way out and if her mind was altered by terror, she would not be able to think clearly.

All of a sudden the lights came back on. She blinked as her eyes tried to readjust to the light.

“Hello, Laicee. Welcome.” A male voice startled her.

She looked around the dimly lit room and finally spotted where the deep voice had come from. There, standing in the dark corner by the door, was the silhouette of a thin man wearing a baseball cap. He was leaning against the wall.

Even though he was looking straight at her, it was hard for her to get a good look at his face because his cap was pulled down low over his face.

“How do you know my name?” Laicee tried to keep her voice as steady as she could.

“You came to me in a dream.”

“A dream?” She slowly began to sit up.

“Yes. I’ve been praying for a long time now. And finally a week ago, God answered me through a dream.”

“What were you praying for?” She was almost too scared to ask, fearing the response.

She didn’t know whether to feel relieved or more scared when he didn’t answer right away. A feeling of uneasiness came over her when she felt him staring at her. Suddenly he used his right leg to push off the wall and walked towards her. He stepped into the light. He wore a dark gray T-shirt and a pair of what looked like worn-out jeans. He was looking down at the floor.

He slowly raised his head to look over at her. The dim light revealed a rough face, like he hadn’t shaved in several days. His forehead and cheeks were scarred with indentations—no doubt from years of battling acne.

He was glaring at her, but suddenly broke out into a smile. His eyes showed a mixture of anger and entitlement.

“A wife.”

# Chapter 1

“Okay, guys. Here’s our fifth victim. Her name is Laicee Hannighan. She’s sixteen years old. She fits the same profile as The Groom’s other four victims.” Detective Rivers taped a picture of her up on a dry-erase board.

Her picture was last in a row of four other pictures of smiling young women. Below their smiling pictures was a picture of each one as they’d been found on the road. Underneath the pictures were notes that had been jotted down by the detective. They included a summary of the information they had so far on the victims.

“Blond, pretty and young. She and Kathy were the only ones in high school. The others were in college at the time of their abduction.” He turned and looked at police officers sitting at several wooden desks in a room used essentially for debriefing officers of situations such as these.

Detective Albert “Al” Rivers was shorter than most of his men, standing at a mere five foot, two inches. He was in his mid-fifties and had mentioned retirement so many times that his men took bids every day as to when he would actually go through with it. However, when this case came along a little over a year ago, all betting was put on hold. Rivers had a record to keep—in the thirty years he’d been a detective, he didn’t have a single unsolved case to his name—and he wasn’t about to start now.

“How long has she been missing?” One of the officers asked.

“Two weeks. The first victim, Janice Wilkerson, was found dead five months after she went missing.” He turned and pointed at a picture of each one of the victims as he spoke. “The second victim, Patty Lewis, was found after three months. Victims three and four, Kathy Masnk and Sherry Porter, were found after just a month and half. They were all tortured, raped and strangled. All four of them were found wearing a wedding dress and wedding bands. Now, either he’s getting more impatient with them or he’s perfecting his technique. Whichever it is, this means that we probably have *at most* three more weeks to find Laicee before he kills her.”

“He grabs them at night, after they get off work, right?” Another officer asked.

“Correct. The last time any of these girls was seen, they were getting off their night shifts. All five girls only worked a couple of nights a week, the rest of the time they worked days. So this means that after he’d picked them out, he stalked them to figure out their work schedules. Laicee was last seen heading out to the parking lot after her shift at The Burger Hut.”

“Who’s gonna get the collar?” A third cop inquired.

“The collar?”

“Well, Wilkerson and Porter were found in Venice and the others were found here in Boca Raton...so who gets the collar?”

“I don’t give a damn about a turf war. The important thing is finding Laicee—*alive*. But *yes*, we *will* be working with and trading information with the VPD. I expect each and every one of you to cooperate, *fully*.” He emphasized.

“Where are we meeting?” The first officer asked.

“Venice is sending over the detective in charge of the Groom case over there. He’ll be here in an hour. I want everybody to re-read the case files and be ready as soon as he arrives. Laicee is our number one priority at this point.”

Venice’s head detective arrived forty-five minutes after Detective Rivers had left his men to their reading. He looked a lot younger than Rivers—maybe in his thirties. A woman accompanied him and they were led into the debriefing room

and shown to a couple of seats that had been placed aside for them.

“First I want to welcome you to our precinct and thank you for being willing to cooperate with us. It’s good to know that something as trivial as a turf war won’t get in the way of justice. Unfortunately, even after a year, we don’t have much on this guy. We’ve gone over the victim’s homes, their jobs and interviewed anyone that knew them. No one, including the families, could tell us anything. This guy is a chameleon. If the girls noticed him, they never said anything to anyone.”

“Have you guys been able to get a description of the guy? Any witnesses see weird guys hanging around the parking lot?” The VPD’s detective asked.

“You mean other than the usual sleazebags that hang around? No. Everyone we talked to said they never noticed anything different. So we’re flying blind here. Did you get any witnesses?” Rivers asked in turn.

He shook his head.

“Well, here’s what we *do* have. He likes young, pretty women who are blond. They’ve all been found wearing a wedding dress and a ring. He doesn’t just throw them out of the car; he lays them carefully on the side of the highway, where someone is sure to find them. But he leaves them so clean that we can’t get anything on him. This guy is a ghost.”



“A wife?” Laicee stared at him, careful not to show the disgust she was feeling.

It was hard to stay calm when her heartbeat was pounding so hard through her chest she was waiting for it to break through her shirt at any minute. But she couldn’t give him the satisfaction of knowing how truly terrified she was at this moment. While growing up, she’d witnessed all too well how predators lived on the fear of their victims and she would be damned if she would give him that pleasure before she died.

“Yes. It’s God’s design for a man to have a woman by his side.” He took a step toward her.

Her hands balled up into fists. *Keep your cool, Laicee. You can’t think straight if you don’t keep your cool.*

He took another couple of steps and came to stand right in front of her. He reached out his hand to her. Fighting back her tears as hard as she could, she looked over at his hand and then placed hers in it. He helped her stand up and pulled her close to him. After putting his hand around her waist, he began to sway back and forth. She was pulled closer so that the side of his head rested against hers.

He smelled her hair and suddenly she felt something hard press against her. She stiffened and he immediately let go of her.

“Look at what you made me do!” He smacked her in the face with the back of his hand. “We can’t until we’re married!”

Laicee fell back onto the bed. She looked up at him and glared.

“This is a sin! You’re making me sin! You have to be cleansed!” All of a sudden, he grabbed her hand and pulled her towards the door.

He yanked it open and pulled her out of the room with him. They started walking down a badly lit hallway.

“Where are you taking me?” She demanded.

“You have to be cleansed!”

“No, wait! I’m sorry! I’m sorry I made you sin! I won’t do it anymore, I swear!”

He stopped and looked at her. He let go of her arm and wrapped his fingers around her neck. Then he threw her back against the wall and sneered as his fingers squeezed her neck tightly. Laicee started to gag and her hands shot up to grab onto his.

“Swearing is a sin. Sinners have to die!”

“No! Please!” She choked out. “I’ll...stop...I’ll...stop...sinning.” She felt lightheaded and the hallway started to spin around her.

His face started to become fuzzy as she lost focus and then everything went dark.

When she woke up she felt something cool against her skin. She rubbed the side of her head trying to get rid of her headache. She looked around her and noticed white tile. All of a sudden cold water poured down on her. She gasped and tried to get away from it, but a hand tightened around her arm and pulled her back.

“Sit still. You have to be cleansed!”

Her eyes widened when she realized she was sitting naked in a shower stall. He was glaring down at her. He grabbed her hair and shoved her head under the shower. Then he took a bottle that had been sitting on the floor next to him. He poured some white liquid on her head and began to scrub her.

She flinched and tried to get away when the metal points dug into her scalp. But he grabbed her hair and pulled her back to him. She tried to move away again and this time he balled her hair in his hand and pulled her inches from his face.

“If I can’t cleanse you, I’ll have to kill you. Sinners have to die.”

Looking into the eyes of the clearly deranged man in front of her, Laicee suddenly held still and let him scrub her head. She clenched her teeth as the hard bristles of the brush dug into her head—careful not to move or make any noise that would make him angrier. She looked down at the floor and watched as drops of blood painted the white tile crimson.

He must have noticed as well because he suddenly stopped scrubbing. He put his hand under her chin and lifted her face to look at him.

“I’m sorry. I’m sorry for hurting you.” His voice was tender and caring.

“It’s okay. I deserve it for sinning.” Laicee responded and smiled weakly.

“I’ll be more gentle. But I have to wash away your sin.” He grabbed the bar of soap that was lying next to the bottle of shampoo.

He lathered up his hands and went to wash her shoulders. She sat still and stared at the floor. Unexpectedly he stopped and handed the soap to her.

“You do it.”

Laicee looked up at him and then took the bar of soap. He turned, stood up and turned around.

“Hurry.”

She bathed herself as quickly as she could. She didn’t want to instigate any more of his anger.

“I’m done.” She said faintly a couple of minutes later.

He walked over to the wall on the right of the open shower. He grabbed the white towel that hung there and handed it to her before turning back around. She quickly dried off and then wrapped it around herself.

“What do you want me to wear?”

“There.” He pointed to the chair that sat beside the shower.

A shirt and a pair of pants lay on the chair. She noticed that there was no underwear or bra, but quickly slipped them on.

“I’m dressed.”

He said nothing, just grabbed her and led her back to her room. He threw her inside and shut the door.

Laicee walked over to the bed and sat down against the wall. She brought her knees up to her chin and just stared at the floor. She had to figure a way out of there, but it was hard to think of anything other than the stinging burn on top of her head.

Laicee was staring at the bed when she heard a latch shift and the door scrape open. She looked up and saw him standing there. He was holding a tray out to her. She stood up and walked over to him.

“Thank you.” She smiled as she took the tray and then turned to walk back to the bed.

“You’re welcome.”

His soft tone stopped her in her tracks and she looked back at him. His smile looked affectionately shy. It painted a completely different picture from the man that had just finished scrubbing her head until it bled. She smiled back and then walked over to the bed. By the time she’d sat down, the door had closed and the latch replaced.

Laicee looked down at the tray. Her eyes widened in surprise as she stared down at the meal sitting on an elegant porcelain

plate. Small cut up pieces of well-done steak lay beside a clump of mashed potatoes and some green beans. The spoon that lay beside the plate was silver-plated. In the corner of the tray was a glass of water.

She laid the tray on her lap and scooped up a piece of the steak in her spoon. She fully expected to drop dead within seconds of eating, but took a bite anyway. When nothing happened, she gave in to her hunger and gulped down the food. Within seconds of finishing, the latch clicked and the door opened. He walked in and walked over to her. He gazed down at her.

“Did you like it?” His voice was as soft as before.

“Yes, it was very good. Thank you.”

He took the tray and left the room.

*He can see me. But where’s the camera?* She thought to herself.

She looked up, put her hand on the back of her neck and rubbed it. She didn’t want to make it obvious she was looking for a hidden camera. As her head moved back and forth, she quickly glanced around the room. There was nothing but rough cement without any cracks. She lowered her head once more so it wouldn’t be obvious she was searching.

“I..I have to go to the bathroom. Please?” She called out towards the door ten minutes later. “Please? If you’re there?”

Within minutes the door opened and he poked his head in.

“All right. But if you try to leave me, I’ll have to punish you.”

“I won’t.”

He held out his hand and helped her stand up. He followed her out of the room and down the hallway to the room he’d showered her in. It had the same cement walls as her room. The toilet was up against the wall to the right of the shower.

He nodded for her to go in and then turned around. Laicee went as quickly as she could and walked over to the sink to wash her hands. Despite the fact that the room was bare-looking—the sink sat against the left wall, the toilet against the right and a small tiled shower in the back—it looked clean and sanitized. Not dirty and full of mold like you would see in a horror movie.

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A horror movie—was that what this was? The setting was like one in a horror movie. A psychopath that was deranged one minute and a complete gentleman the next was holding her hostage. Laicee dreaded thinking what was going to happen next. She knew he wasn't going to just let her go, so what else was there? She shuddered.

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