

THE BEST REVENGE SERIES™

Emerge

The Opening of the Human Heart
to the Power of Love

Inspired by a True Event

by Susan M. Omilian JD



Butterfly Bliss Productions LLC
West Hartford, CT

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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.*

*May the reading of this story be a healing journey
for those who have been
most devastated by your loss.
You were so loved!*

*My heart is moved by all that I cannot save;
so much has been destroyed.
I have to cast my lot with those who, age after age,
perversely with no extraordinary power,
reconstitute the world.*

—Adrienne Rich

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Susan M. Omilian

Note from the Author

Readers of *Awaken*, the first book in *The Best Revenge Series™*, will remember that the inspiration for this story told in a series of three fictional books was a true event. On October 17, 1999, my niece Maggie, a nineteen-year-old college student, was shot and killed on campus by her ex-boyfriend who then killed himself.

As I wrote in *Awaken*, that story came to me by using one of the best tools that a fiction writer has: the “what if” method of finding the story. What if there was a young woman like Maggie who had been killed in a similar manner? What would happen to that person, her friends and family members? Would she ever rest in peace? How would they find a way to move forward without her?

With this book, *Emerge*, set ten years after the death of Lacey, my fictional main character, I continue to explore those intriguing questions as well as others. What could Lacey’s friends do after such a horrific event to honor her and make the world safe for other women like her? What issues would they take on? What would they be able to accomplish in ten years? What about the next ten years?

While these are great “what if” questions to speculate about in a fictional story, it is true that because this book is being published in 2019, you, the reader, already know what actually happened in the real world during that twenty-year period from 1999 to 2019. We know, for example, that the #MeToo movement started in 2017 and spread so virally on social media in the United States and around the world that it immediately raised the awareness of how widespread and prevalent sexual assault, domestic violence, and sexual harassment still are in our society. It created greater empathy for the victims—mostly female—and a better understanding of the impact of these crimes on them physically, financially, and emotionally.

It is the impact of violence on women and girls that the fictional *Emerge* story describes in 2009, eight years before the #Me-Too movement and before terms such as “trauma-informed care” and “survivor-centered services” entered the public discourse. In the story, several characters are in that healing process and their stories show how by surrounding yourself with people—family, friends, colleagues—who can give you unconditional love, the effects of the trauma experienced can be lessened. Lisette, one of the main characters in the novel, describes how she was looking for and found “reliable love,” given without conditions or offered without anticipation of getting something in return. It is the kind of love we can get from others and we can also give ourselves because no matter what mistakes we’ve made, we are still worthy and deserving of such love. May you be inspired by Lisette’s journey to find such love and use it to fuel your journey to manifest the life of your dreams.

Ever since I was a little girl, I dreamed of writing novels with intriguing characters and powerful plotlines that people would love. This series of books, first *Awaken*, now *Emerge*, and finally *Thrive*, is that dream fulfilled. True, I didn’t wish for something so tragic and sad, such as the death of my niece Maggie, to be a way for me realize this dream. But good things can come from tragedy. After all, living well is the best revenge!

I will miss Maggie every day of my life, but I will also celebrate her life each day by living my best life. I hope this book will inspire you to do the same.

Susan M. Omilian

*“When I despair, I remember that all through history the ways
of truth and love have always won. There have been tyrants,
and murderers, and for a time they can seem invincible,
but in the end, they always fall.
Think of it—always.”*

— Mahatma Gandhi

CONTENTS

Acknowledgments.....vi
Note from the Author.....vii
Prologue – <i>August 25, 1979</i> – From Marie’s Diary.....1
<i>December 24, 1990</i> – From Lisa’s Diary.....3
Chapter 1 – Before the Anniversary.....5
Chapter 2 – In the Garden of Peace and Justice.....25
Chapter 3 – Blamestorming.....42
Chapter 4 – Playing Politics.....64
Chapter 5 – The Deal Is Done.....84
Chapter 6 – Old Problems, New Beginnings.....104
Chapter 7 – Appreciation.....118
Chapter 8 – Calm Before the Storm.....137
Chapter 9 – A Phone Call Away.....150
Chapter 10 – The Day of.....172
Chapter 11 – What Jenny Doesn’t Know.....186
Chapter 12 – The Arrival200
Chapter 13 – Repercussions.....210
Chapter 14 – We Are Family.....221
Chapter 15 – Unbounded Love.....241
Epilogue – <i>October 17, 2019</i> – The Anniversary.....267

Discussion Questions/
Reader's Guide for Individuals and Groups.....271

Warning Signs of an Abusive Relationship.....273

Resources.....276

Books by Susan M. Omilian, JD.....279

About the Author.....281

Living well is the best revenge.

— George Herbert

*There is no inner landscape in the invisible world of our souls
and hearts but is full of the most melodious and
nourishing and wild freedom.
And everyone should go there, to the wild place, where there are
no cages, where there are not tight rooms without windows
and without doors, everyone should go to the free clearance
places in their own hearts.*

— John O'Donohue

*We need love
as we need water.*

— Maya Angelou

PROLOGUE

August 25, 1979

From Marie's Diary

Today it's my nineteenth birthday, and I am starting this diary as a birthday present to myself. I want to write down everything so I won't forget because this is the story of my new life. I am going through what some people call a "transformation"—a big word, but it simply means that from this day forward, I will never be the same again.

Everything I write here is the absolute truth. So help me God! I don't know how it happened to me, but it did. I am after all just a girl who makes her living as an exotic dancer—I guess that's the polite word for it. I dance real sexy for men in bars and don't wear a lot of clothes when I do it. My favorite tune to dance to is "Bad Girls" by Donna Summer, so you know where I'm coming from. I don't know where to start this story, so I'll just begin by saying I'm in love with Brad and Brad's in love with me. Bradford Reginald Bufford. That's his full name. It's a great name to put a Mrs. in front of—Mrs. Bradford Reginald Bufford—and soon it'll be my name. I never knew that anything this good could happen to me. I am so happy!

How did I meet someone with such a great name like Bradford? Someone whose family has money and who fell in love with me? That's the most amazing part of the story. One afternoon last

April, I was sitting around with some of the girls I dance with at the bar watching the soaps before our shift started. Suddenly, a news flash breaks in, and we all groan because we hate to miss our shows. But this news guy was going on about a meltdown at the nuclear power plant in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, at a place called Three Mile Island and how all this radioactive stuff got into the air and so I guess we all should've been listening to him. But then this other guy comes on from a local anti-nuke group—who turns out later to be Brad—and boy, he got our attention. Not by what he was saying but because of his gorgeous face, incredible body, and these amazing dark brown eyes. Me and the girls goofed around talking dirty about what it would be like to land someone like him when one of the girls broke in.

“Hey, forget it,” she said. “None of us will ever get close to him. He’s too rich, too white bread.”

I didn’t know what she meant by white bread, but her mouthing off felt like a dare, so I took her on.

I said, “I bet you I could get him to want to marry me and take me home to meet his folks. You know, the whole thing, babies and a big house in the suburbs.”

All the girls laughed, but I was serious. I knew I could do it! Next thing I know, I’m making up a plan about how I can meet Brad.

I needed the right look. I fixed my hair differently, toned down my makeup, and found a second-hand shop in town where I got me some clothes that make me look like a college girl. Then I went to the office where Brad worked and asked for him. I told him how I saw him on television the other day about Three Mile Island and how that freaked me out. I wanted to help. I was worried that he might be all stuck up and not as good-looking in person, but when I saw him, he was even more gorgeous and *soooo* nice. He explained everything to me about what his group was

Prologue

doing, but I was hooked the moment he flashed those dark brown eyes at me. I had my own meltdown, you see. Just a joke, ha-ha. An anti-nuke joke. Get it?

Now that I know him better, I do think we could make it together, have kids and all that. I'm serious about this. I love him, and he loves me. I've always wanted a daughter. I'd name her Lisa. I love that name! And our son would be Brad Jr. We'd be proud of our kids, and I'd give them the kind of love that I never got from my parents. Plus all the things I never had! We'd love them to the moon!

That's how Brad says he loves me—to the moon and back!

I am so happy. I did it. I am part of Brad's life now and forever.

We are happy.

Nothing can stop us now.

December 24, 1990

From Lisa's Diary

It is Christmas Eve. I am ten years old. I don't write real good but Mommy says I should write in my diary when I feel lost or confused. I sure feel like that today.

My Mommy's name is Marie. She gave this diary to me on my birthday and showed me hers. She has kept it for a long time. Someday I can read it, she says, but not now. That's okay.

Mommy is real sick and in the hospital. Ralph is coming to get me soon to take me to see her there for Christmas. It is hard to see her so sick. When I go there, I sit with her and she smiles and holds my hand. But then she gets really tired and falls asleep.

Ralph is my dad. When he's mad at me, he says he's not. Mommy says he is joking. I don't care as long as Mommy is here. Mommy says that she loves me to the moon and back. It's a long way to the moon. She says that means she loves me a lot.

EMERGE

I wish she felt better. I don't want her to go away. Ralph told me if I was bad Mommy would go away. But I don't believe him. He is a liar. Mommy always told me telling a lie was bad. Ralph is bad. My mommy is good.

Mommy says she loves me no matter what and she'll never leave me. We will always be together.

Please don't leave me, Mommy. I'll miss you, Mommy. I love you.

I love you to the moon and back!

CHAPTER ONE

Wednesday, October 14, 2009

Before the Anniversary

Lisette wasn't thrilled about coming back to this place. After all, it was the college on the hill where ten years ago a crazy guy named Ari, a man with a gun, killed Lacey and then killed himself.

But she was there on a Wednesday, a few days before the tenth anniversary of that horrible day October 17, 1999. Besides not wanting to be reminded of all the trauma and drama of that time in her life, she never felt comfortable on a college campus. True, it was here that she found Sophie, Lacey's college roommate and best friend, who believed Lisette when she told her that Lacey's spirit had come into her body and she needed her help. It was a wild ride, but at least, Lacey was at peace now.

But Lisette's biggest fear of being on the campus again was more about how little schooling she had and how she couldn't read so good. Then too, she had been a stripper dancing under the stage name of Attila the Hunny the night Lacey died and when she first met Sophie at Lacey's funeral days later. Lisette felt stupid even being around college kids and couldn't understand why Sophie wanted her to come back and help her celebrate the tenth anniversary of Lacey's murder. To Lisette, it was more like something you'd want to forget or try to remember without feeling sad, but

somehow Sophie saw it as a celebration. She was putting together a Tenth Anniversary Gala—that’s what she called it—and she wanted Lisette to help her.

As crazy as it sounded, Lisette couldn’t say no. When Sophie told her of her plan to gather all those who had helped her become so successful in her work—and her work *was* amazing—so she could thank them personally, Lisette wasn’t sure that she was one of the people to thank. She hadn’t done that much. Sophie was the one who was so smart, so clever, and so brave. She knew how to get things done. Still Lisette was curious about what she had accomplished and how everyone and everything was. She had heard so much about it from Sophie on the phone and in the letters she wrote her. She had to see it with her own eyes.

But riding up to the school in a taxi that afternoon wasn’t exactly the best way to take it all in, Lisette realized later. She could see that the buildings on the campus looked the same, but the students...they looked so much younger than she remembered. Of course, she was ten years older now—almost 30—and not getting any younger. For someone in her line of work, staying and looking young was everything.

As the taxi drove through the campus and headed toward the large, open green space where the Student Center was located, Lisette wondered if Sophie or anyone else on the campus would actually recognize her now.

In the last ten years, she had gone through quite a transformation from Attila the Hunny, the stripper, to a successful businesswoman. Only Todd, her business manager and sometime boyfriend, knew how hard that change had been for her. But it wasn’t the biggest change she had ever made in her life. True, in the last ten years, she had lent her stage name, Attila the Hunny, to a nationwide chain of strip joints, which Todd liked to call “upscale male entertainment

venues.” The business logo featured that pouty pose of her dressed up in her skimpy, white furry outfit she had worn for years on the stage—her Attila the Hunny getup. *Ha!* she thought. She got paid a lot of money now licensing her name and image for the clubs, but she had to admit, what she was doing wasn’t so remarkable or exciting. Not compared to Sophie’s work for sure!

But Todd thought she was wonderful and smart, and he needed her in the business. Sure, she worked with new girls hired for the Attila the Hunny clubs, but mostly Lisette lived off the royalties from the use of her name and image on that company logo. She imagined doing something more important and special, something for women who grew up hard like she had to help them be financially successful too. Couldn’t she find a way to do that? Maybe that’s why she came when Sophie called.

She wished Todd had come with her so he might understand what she really wanted to do, but he said he couldn’t take the time away from the business. Still he encouraged her to go. “Have a good time,” he said as he hugged and kissed her that morning. Then he held her for a moment as if he didn’t really want her to go. “Come back and tell me what’s going on with everyone. I want a full report on the place that was the inspiration for our Attila the Hunny franchise.”

But that’s what he didn’t get, Lisette thought. Attila the Hunny was something that she had worked on for years, perfecting the act, the music she played, and the costumes she wore, but it was just a job. It was something her mother had done and she fell into to support herself. But being a stripper wasn’t the only thing she wanted to do. Something else was calling her, but what was it?

That question haunted her most days, and today it was like a voice screaming in her head: “What are you doing? You need to make more of yourself! Look at what Sophie has done in honor of her best friend Lacey! What have you done? Nothing!”

Still Lisette knew she had come a long way in her life. After losing her mother, Marie, when she was only ten years old, she had escaped living with her father, Ralph, at sixteen. That's when she changed her name from "Lisa" to "Lisette," which she believed was a sexier, cooler name. Then, at nineteen years of age, she was dancing in town one night at the Pussycat's Meow as the headline stripper. That's when things really changed in her life.

The wild ride she took ten years ago started with finding Sophie here on the campus, working with her and her grandmother, Radiance, a shaman, to journey to the Upper World and help Lacey's spirit cross over. Lisette remembered how happy Lacey was to see her mother again, there on the other side, ready to help her over and enter paradise. That experience had changed Lisette's life. She went back home to Los Angeles, gave up dancing, and got into business. She liked the money and fame that came with lending her stripper name to clubs all over the globe, but something was missing. Sophie's letters and phone calls over the last ten years made Lisette realize that there was something back here, in this town, on this campus, that she needed to see and be inspired by. She needed to know what Sophie had done to transform what happened to Lacey into something good, something to help others. Maybe then she could find her way to do something like that too.

As the taxi stopped in front of the Student Center, Lisette got out and paid the driver. She had arrived this morning from LA, gone to her hotel from the airport, and after unpacking her bags, came here to meet Sophie for lunch. Sophie told her she'd meet her at the Student Center because her office on campus was right up the hill next to the chapel. She'd watch for her up there, await her text that she had arrived, then come down to meet her.

Lisette was excited to see Sophie and spend some time with her before all the festivities began over the weekend. But before walking toward the Student Center, she looked up the hill toward the chapel and was filled with amazement. What she saw she could

never have imagined ten years ago. *My God!* Lisette marveled. Lacey would be so proud of all Sophie had accomplished! She had found her best revenge. But what about hers?

Would Lisette ever get there, too?



Sitting in her office near the top of the hill in a building next to the chapel, Sophie looked down at the Student Center. She knew that soon Lisette would drive up in a taxi and she'd be there on this campus for the first time in ten years. That fact amazed Sophie not only because it had been that long since Lacey was gone, but also that she was still here on this campus, trying to make a difference. It was that hard.

She often wondered what Lacey would have done if she, Sophie, was the one who had been killed so violently, so senselessly and Lacey was the one who had survived. In the short time that Sophie knew her, Lacey was driven, single-minded and downright stubborn. Maybe she would have accomplished more than Sophie had so far, maybe not. But at least, Sophie was determined not to give up. Lacey was never a quitter.

Although she had graduated seven years ago from the college, Sophie had come back here after law school to take a part-time job at the school. She wanted to do the work she had vowed to do the night her best friend was shot and killed in a dorm room on the other side of campus. But this wasn't Sophie's only job. She also worked off campus at a nonprofit organization she had founded three years ago. She loved what she did. It gave her joy every day to be doing this work.

Today she was excited to see Lisette again. They had bonded for life ten years ago but she knew that the sight of Lisette would both delight and unnerve her. Sure, Lisette would still have her amazing physique and stunningly beautiful face. She wouldn't have changed a bit! But the sight of her would fill Sophie with a

flood of memories and, for a moment perhaps, an overwhelming sense of sadness. Lisette had come back to town today, and they'd laugh and have lunch together like old friends. But Lacey, the one true friend in her life, would still be gone.

She still missed Lacey so much and all that they had planned to do together after they graduated college. They were going to go out and change the world, making it a better place for their children. Of course, the work they were going to do would be very glamorous and fulfilling and yet still leave time for a happy, successful relationship with the man of their dreams. Sophie would often laugh at their naiveté, about how their future would unfold and wonder if Lacey, wherever she was, shared her assessment.

The work she did now was here on this campus and it was hardly glamorous. It was satisfying and fulfilling except that she always felt as if she hadn't accomplished enough. There was so much more to do. At least today, she could show off to Lisette some of the work she had done to date on and off campus. Then later this weekend at the Tenth Anniversary Gala, everyone would see not only what had been accomplished to date, but also what her vision was for the future. The work had to continue and be expanded to ensure Lacey's legacy on this campus and beyond.

Sophie had to keep going. This was only the beginning, she told herself from the start. Get the guns, change the campus, save the victims, and heal the survivors.

She had to do it for Lacey. She had to do it for herself.

As Sophie waited for Lisette, she remembered that day ten years ago when she took the first step.



Thursday, November 18, 1999

Sophie was pissed.

She had read in the police report after Lacey's murder last month about the gun store where Ari had bought the gun that

killed Lacey, and she knew she had to do something about it. Isn't that what Lacey always said? "This is so unfair! We have to do something about it!"

But it wasn't going to be easy. She could see that she had no authority to tell this gun shop owner to do anything. But she thought maybe, just maybe, she could appeal to his heart. But then she wondered, do people who sell guns that kill other people have a heart? Or is it just all about making money?

She didn't know. All she knew was that she had to try. It was a whole month since Lacey's death and she had to do something!

Driving to the gun store, Sophie had her doubts. Maybe she should have had someone else come with her. She could have waited until Lisette was available. She was still in town, and it looked as if she and Erick might get together. But Lisette was busy today, and Sophie couldn't wait for another day.

Still it would've made more sense to have someone come with her. What if the guy in the gun store got pissed at her and tried to throw her out? She had no backup and he had all the guns. She didn't know anything about guns. Her mother and grandmother, Radiance, would never let her have toy guns when she was growing up. Her mother was a hippie, after all. She was into her peace marches and taking drugs, too many drugs. What made Sophie think she could talk about guns with this guy!

As she turned the corner onto the street where the gun store was located, she saw the word "GUNS" painted in large letters on the front of the building, with the name of the store "Guns Galore!" underneath it. Suddenly the glaring realization that this was the place Ari came to buy the gun that killed Lacey hit her. Maybe this wasn't the thing that should be occupying her focus and attention so soon after her best friend's death.

Then she heard Lacey's voice in her head again—"This is so unfair"—that Ari could just walk into this place and buy a gun.

Then again, “we have to do something about this,” and Sophie knew she had to at least try to talk to the owner of this shop.

She got out of the car, grabbed her notebook, and headed through the front door into the store. As she did it, she gagged at the pungent smell—oil, grease, and the odor of metals. She saw counters, one after the other, of guns of all kinds, shapes, and sizes. *Amazing!* she thought. *Were there really so many choices out there?* Not to mention ammunition, all kinds of hats, targets, and clothing. She walked up and down the aisles until she came to a glass counter with a cash register on it. Behind it was a wall with all kinds of gadgets and products for the hunter, sportsman, and gun owner. Sophie almost felt for a moment that these gun owners were just like any other shoppers, and they would come here to get it all.

But then she saw a sign saying, “*God made man, but Samuel Colt made them equal,*” attributed to Colt Manufacturing. Of course, that was a reference to the guns like the Colt 45 manufactured by Colt. Suddenly Sophie felt as if she were in alien NRA territory where the National Rifle Association ruled, and nobody would care about what happened to Lacey. In her mind’s eye she could see Lacey’s face and the gun blast and how Ari killed her. Her heart jumped, and she felt nauseous. *This is too much,* she thought. *I can’t do it.*

As she was about to turn around and escape this crazy world, a man emerged from a door behind the counter and called out to her.

“Can I help you, Miss? Is there something you’re looking for today?”

Sophie turned slowly to see a man, tall and lean, with crisp blue eyes and long silver-streaked hair pulled back into a ponytail. She was startled not only by his gentle appearance, but also his mellow-sounding voice. He couldn’t be the owner, she thought. That aggressive, hard person must be in the back room hiding out.

“No, no,” Sophie stammered. “I just came to...to...”

He looked at her for a long moment, taking her in, maybe assessing why she was there, and then he asked her casually, “You must be a college student, right? I have a daughter about your age. Did you see her picture on our website?” He pointed to the wall behind him where there was a framed photo of a younger girl with soft blonde curls holding a gun up to her face and smiling. “That was taken a few years ago to be sure,” he added with a smile. “But she’s still loves her guns!”

His friendliness unnerved her. He talked so casually about his young daughter loving guns, and he acted like Sophie had come to shop for guns the way she might shop for shoes at Walmart.

Okay, she thought quickly, I have to do this—for Lacey.

She took a deep breath and began.

“Are you the owner of this store? I need to talk to the owner.”

“Yeah, that’s me. Jimmy Trager,” he replied with a swagger.

“Um, okay. I wanted to...I need to ask you something.” She paused for a moment, then blurted out, “Do you really own this place?”

“Yes,” he said slowly, like he was trying to be patient with her, but he sighed and then his voice went deeper. “This is my business, been in my family for years. It belonged to my father before me, and my grandfather before him.” Then his voice returned to a friendlier tone. “Who knows? Maybe I’ll hand it down to my daughter, Trisha!”

“So how old is your daughter?”

“She’ll be nineteen this month.”

“Really?” Sophie said with surprise. His daughter wasn’t any older than Sophie.

“Yeah,” he continued. “She’s all grown up and going to school out of state. She says she’s a business major.” Then he smiled. “Who knows, maybe she will turn this business into a gold mine.

Then I can retire and live off her hard work after all those years of her living off mine!”

All this chatter about his legacy of the family business to his daughter was overwhelming Sophie. She had to be brave and remember why she was here.

“Listen,” she began, her voice as firm as she could muster with her knees shaking beneath her. “I’m here to let you know—” She stopped and corrected herself. “Actually, I’m here to demand to know why you sold a gun to this man.” She pulled a folded page of a newspaper out of her notebook and flashed it in front of him. On the page was a photo of Ari with the article about Lacey’s murder.

The man stared at the page but didn’t speak.

“You remember him, right?” she demanded.

The man sighed, “Yes, he was here. He wanted to buy a gun, and I sold it to him. That’s it.”

“No,” Sophie shot back. “That’s not it. He killed my friend.” She pulled up the newspaper article again and pointed to Lacey’s photo on the other side of the fold. “See her face? He blew her face away with the gun that you sold him. Do you care that what you sell here kills people?”

She was getting agitated now. She could feel her face getting hot and her stomach turning from the anger she felt.

The man shook his head, and his voice softened when he spoke. “Listen, I’m sorry about your friend. I don’t sell guns to hurt people, but I can’t control how people use the products I sell. Sure, I remember this kid. He said he wanted to go hunting; it was hunting season.”

“But according to this newspaper article,” she said, waving the page in front of him again, “he gave you a college dormitory address and you didn’t feel an obligation to contact the college about the gun. Do you know that our college has a zero-tolerance, no-guns-on-campus policy? It was just put into place this fall.”

"No," he admitted. "Of course I didn't know about that policy. And I have no legal obligation to report to anyone at the college. The only thing I'm required by law to do is a simple background check on anyone who buys a hunting rifle. Usually it only takes a day. With a handgun, it takes longer, but he didn't want to buy a handgun."

"But that may be why he wanted a hunting rifle. Don't you see? He was a computer kid. He knew how to research guns and gun laws on the internet. He figured out that you'd ask him the least number of questions if he bought a hunting rifle. Particularly in hunting season and in goddamn NRA country here."

"Look," he said, leaning over the counter. "This is not my problem. Jesus, what do you want from me? I sell guns for a living." Then he repeated, "I can't control what people do with them." His voice was rising now, and it looking to Sophie as though he was reaching for one of the guns under the counter.

"Oh, great!" she cried. "What are you planning to do now? Kill me too with that gun you are reaching for? Solve your problem about me coming in here and accusing you of having no morals. That's what Ari did, don't you see that? Buy a gun, solve a problem. Makes it so simple!"

"All right," the man said, suddenly straightening up and grabbing the phone next to him on the counter. "I'm going to ask you to leave my store right now. If you don't choose to do that, I'll call the police. Do you understand?"

"Yes, I understand," she replied sarcastically. "Remember, I'm a college student, and I know how to do research on the internet too. I know the limits of your legal obligations. I was just hoping as a human being you would want to go a little further. Like help me do something about this."

"Do what? About what?"

"About the proliferation of guns on college campuses. Did you

know that a study by Harvard School of Public Health just this past July found that over 3.5 percent—or 450,000 college students—currently keep a working firearm at college? That fact is shocking and scary to me!”

“Look, if your friend had a gun, she could have defended herself, and maybe she’d still be alive today.”

“Great! You want our college campuses to be like the Wild West. Shoot-outs in dorm rooms, and if you don’t like someone, or someone has broken up with you and you are an angry, controlling man, it’s okay to shoot the girl. Maybe if she’s lucky, she can shoot you back so you die before her. That’s crazy!”

The man’s face was bright red now, and he was shaking his finger in her face. “I’m asking you to leave right now, and I do mean NOW! Or I will call the cops.”

“Fine,” she shot back. “I’ll be leaving your family-owned, ‘I’m American and proud of it’ business. But I’ll be back. Don’t think this is the end of this for me. I just thought—crazy thought!—I could come here and maybe find that you had a heart and wanted to help me stop someone else’s best friend from being shot down like an animal.” Sophie stuffed the newspaper article back in her notebook and turn to leave the store.

“By the way,” she yelled over her shoulder as she walked out the door. “Samuel Colt...the hero that you idolize with your quote there. He was an asshole. He sold his guns to both the North and South during the Civil War, and the newspapers at the time labeled him as a Southern sympathizer and traitor to the Union. So much for making everyone equal.”

Then she added, her heart pounding, “You know they ended the violence and hatred of slavery a century ago, despite Samuel Colt’s double dealing. Let’s see how long it takes people to turn on you, too, and I don’t mean with a gun. Remember, we believe in liberty and justice for all. We don’t need guns to make that happen.”

She left the building, feeling momentarily victorious. But then she wondered what exactly she wanted from this guy? What could she do about the guns in light of Lacey's death? She didn't have a plan.

What she did know was that this smug, self-righteous excuse for a human being in there had made her really mad, and when she was that pissed, she didn't let go of anything.

This she wasn't going to let go of at all.



As Lisette emerged from a taxi and stood for a moment before texting Sophie that she had arrive at the Student Center, she recalled the day ten years ago, a month after Lacey was killed.

That day, jumping out of her cab, Lisette had seen Sophie racing out of Guns Galore, heading for her car. She hadn't known Sophie that long, but she knew when Sophia was mad as hell about something. She looked as though steam was coming out both of her ears.

"Hey, Sophie!" Lisette yelled. "I thought you were going to wait for me before you went inside." Lisette gave her a look of disappointment.

Sophie grimaced. "Sorry! I didn't realize you had changed your plans and could be here. I should've waited for you. Maybe you could have charmed the guy better than I did." She opened her car door and threw her notebook and purse on the front seat.

Then she turned back to Lisette, her eyes looking wild again. "Do you know he wants to hand the business down to his daughter some day and keep it in the family? She's only nineteen years old, just like Lacey was! He doesn't get it!"

Lisette sighed. "Sophie, we may not be able to do anything about that."

"Oh yes we will, and we can," Sophie yelled back, her face flushed. "Just you wait and see. There are a lot of changes to be

made here, and at the college too. We have to do something. We can't give up."

"I'm not saying give up, but maybe we should take a breather. I know I need one. With Lacey's death and the whole thing of getting her out of my body, it's too much." She paused and then added, with a catch in her throat, "I need to tell you something. Erick and I broke up this morning." She hesitated a second and then went on. "Actually, I should say that I broke up with him." Then she started to cry. "It was awful, Sophie. I said terrible things to him. He doesn't deserve it. I have to go. Leave town. Go back to Los Angeles."

Sophie came over to Lisette and put her arm around her shoulder. "Don't go. You and Erick can work this out. You've only know each other for a little while. You can work this out. You and Erick are so good together."

"There you go again, being so positive. How do you do that? I sure can't."

"What's the alternative? I'm not saying things are easy, but they can be good again."

Lisette sighed. "One thing is for sure, I need to get back to work. My agent, Mo, is furious with me about canceling a bunch of dates that were coming up, and I'm not sure I can go back on stage. Not after all that's happened with Lacey. Mo wants me to go back to the West Coast and talk to a guy he knows about some business deal he wants to propose. I've got to go and at least talk to him about it."

"What kind of deal?" Sophie asked. "You don't even know if you'll like it. Stay here and help me. We've got a lot of work to do."

"But you're still in school. You've got to finish your classes, and I need to make money for as long as I can in this business. I'm not getting any younger. That's all I can do right now."

Sophie went on, as if she could convince Lisette to stay. "I have a brilliant idea of how to make a difference on the campus, in this

town, maybe even throughout this country. It's wild and crazy, but I know that if we start it now, we can get somewhere big in a few years. Make a difference. Really change things. It's what Lacey would want. "

Then Sophie took a deep breath and looked Lisette in the eye. "Lacey would be outraged by the way she died. So violent, so senselessly, so wrong. She would want us to do something about it. And we will. Please stay and help me."

Lisette stopped her. "You will do something, Sophie. I believe that you can, but I can't stay here. There's been too much pain and loss. I need to get away for a while, maybe longer. I don't know." Then she stopped and laughed. "I'm not as fierce and strong as you are. I just play Attila the Hunny on stage. I'm not the warrior type."

"I think you are," Sophie said softly. "But I know you've gone through a lot and maybe you need some time away from here. But you'll always have a place here. Always!" Then she laughed and said, "When you get that business deal nailed down and make a lot of money, you can give me a bunch for what I want to do. You can be a part of whatever I do. Trust me!"

Then Sophie hugged her and held her for a moment.

"One more thing," Sophie added. "Remember that quote—'Living well is the best revenge?' That's what we want, Lisette. Ari destroyed Lacey's body, but not her soul or her spirit. That will live on in us. She'd want us to live well, despite all that has happened to us, and help others to do so too. That will always be our best revenge!"



Standing there on campus now ten years later, Lisette smiled. She could see how that quote had inspired Sophie's work for the last decade. But Lisette also remembered another date and time that had inspired Sophie on her journey to avenge what happened to Lacey and all of them on that campus.

Lisette still had a letter Sophie wrote to her about Sunday, June 20, 2002, which was graduation day at the college, two years after Lacey had been killed. Lisette loved what Sophie wrote to her about it. She kept the letter and read the last part of it often, almost from memory.

I also had to write you and tell you about graduation day last Sunday here on campus. I thought you should know how Lacey lives on today, as she will forever.

The day was amazing. Very full, very emotional. At times, I felt happy, I felt Lacey. I knew she was with us and she was okay. But then there were times that I missed her so much. I just wanted her to be there and show her around the school, so she could see what had changed, what still needed to be changed. She'd tell us how wonderful and dear we all were, and we'd be pleased and inspired to do more.

Lacey's father, Howard, and her brother, Jimmie, were there for the ceremony. They stood in the reviewing stands above us, but they looked glum. It was as if they were still in shock even though two years have passed since Lacey's death. I felt so bad for them.

A part of the day was very good for me. I loved putting up pictures of Lacey on the school bulletin board in the Student Center, even if the college administrators didn't like that. They have tried over the last two years not to speak of Lacey or show pictures of her on campus. I had to defy them about that on my last day at school. They'd know it was me. I've been an instigator on the campus ever since Lacey's death.

I'm the one who pushed to have the bench put up in Lacey's honor and who demanded every year since her death that there be a remembrance of her on October 17th, the anniversary of that horrible day. I'm the one who insisted that someone be hired to focus on violence against women issues on the campus, and although we only got a part-time employee for now, it's more than what we had before.

Four years ago, when I came to this school, I thought it would be a place that would feed and nourish me before I entered into the adult

world. It would prepare me to face anything, to reach my goal of success and a life well lived. Unfortunately, Lacey's death taught me more about that than anything else that has happened to me on this campus. I've learned to be strong, passionate, and determined. I've also learned that sometimes you have to stand up and say what no one else will say—such as how this college didn't do enough to keep Lacey safe or alive. She was my dearest friend, pal, and confidant. She was the best person I have ever known. I miss her so much!

We honored her Sunday as part of our graduation ceremony. Sure, we still felt a sadness and a feeling of loss, but it was easy to imagine her all dressed up for graduation, happy, smiling, and bubbly. That was our Lacey, always a smile or a laugh and a joke, but serious, real serious, when you had a problem, there for us when we needed her. She could fix anything, including things that seemed impossible. If she couldn't fix it, she'd give you a big smile and say, "It's going to be all right, you'll see." And somehow, even in the most hopeless of situations, you would believe it because she told you so.

As for the graduation ceremony, I know that having Lacey receive her degree even though she died before she took all her courses might seem odd to some people. There are probably some who think it was creepy. But Lacey was a part of this class. She was still been on this campus with us every day, every minute since her death two years ago. We would talk about her sometimes as if she was still here, as if she would be coming through the door of her dorm room any minute. So why not believe that she was walking down the aisle to get her diploma with us too? Others in the history of Lacey's college have been granted degrees after they died in a car accident or from some disease. What makes Lacey's demise different was that she was murdered right here on this campus. Violence against women does exist here at this school and that point had to be made at graduation.

I know that some people don't want to hear about a dead person all the time. For the last two years, I have been accused of being obsessed,

stuck in a bad place, or just plain crazy! Even my family believes at times that I've gone off the deep end. Only my grandmother Ruth (you know her as Radiance the shaman) understands and supports me. Of course, she's a little crazy herself, so I'm not surprised that she gets it.

What does Radiance get? That Lacey's death was not a coincidence or an aberration, as the president of our college likes to tell us whenever he can. He says that going to school at this kind of a college is like living in a bubble that shields us from the troubles and concerns of the outside world. Lacey's death burst that bubble for us, he said and that's why is it so hard. But I see the whole thing very differently. We live in the real world here on campus, and violence against women is a part of that reality here as it is at every school in this country. We have an opportunity to do something about it here, but we haven't done enough in the last two years to deal with it. What is wrong with us? Lacey is dead, and we still haven't gotten this right. How can anyone be safe if no one is safe?

Okay, so I'll probably always feel more bitter, resentful, and frustrated than most of the students about what happened to Lacey. But as we walked into the outside graduation area on the green on a beautiful Sunday afternoon in June, I wanted to make sure no one forgot about how and why Lacey was killed. Yes, I knew that there could be consequences to me if I was found to be the one who instigated this stunt, but could they really take a college degree away from a dead girl's roommate who loved her dearly? Besides it was a brilliant plan I had cooked up, and it worked perfectly!

I'll let a bit of the article from Monday's newspaper describe the rest of it for you, Lisette.

Capitol City Enquirer—Monday, June 21, 2002

Wearing white carnations and purple tags that read "End Violence Against Women" pins, the graduates of the college paid tribute to their classmate, Lacey Lockhart, who was

murdered on the campus in October 1999 by her ex-boyfriend who then killed himself.

During the ceremony, Lacey's name was called in sequence, and when it was, there was a moment of silence. But there also was thunderous applause that lasted a full five minutes.

At the same time, an airplane appeared above the campus trailing a banner behind it that read "End Violence Against Women" on one side and on the other, "Lacey Lives ON." Officials at the college had no comment on the banner, nor did they speculate who might have ordered or paid for such a display.

When asked if the banner was an indictment of the college's failure to address the issue of violence against women on campus, Charles E. Williams Jr., the college's president, said, "We are working on a whole program on violence against women dedicated to keeping Lockhart's memory alive and stopping domestic violence against women." However, President Williams did not detail what reforms or changes have been made on the campus or what plans are being made to create change in the future.

Thank God, Lisette, that no one figured out it was me who did the skywriting banner. Wasn't that cool? Cost me a lot of my graduation money, but it was worth it. I owe Erick, your friend, a big favor. He made sure that my name wasn't on the order. By the way, Erick has been helping me on a few other things I have in the works after I graduate. He's a good guy.

All in all, graduation was quite the day. After the ceremony, I went back to Radiance's apartment and sat looking out the back window of her workroom, the place where you and Lacey came to help her cross over. I watched the rain pouring down, and I felt Lacey with me, talking to me in my ear, telling me that it was a good day and she loved every

minute of it. Is that so crazy? Was it possible that she heard me? And that I could hear her?

Just in case she could, I said out loud, "Thanks, Lacey. It was a special day, and I had to make it big and bold." Suddenly the rain stopped, and everything seemed so clean and shining. The sun came out again, and as the rain was still dripping down, something magical happened in the sky.

A rainbow! Big and bold, high in the sky, and I knew.

Lacey was here with me. She was sending me a sign.

She was happy. And so was I.

Love you!

SOPHIE