

THE BEST REVENGE SERIES™

Thrive

The Journey of the Human Soul
to Discover a Life of Purpose

Inspired by a True Event

by Susan M. Omilian JD



Butterfly Bliss Productions LLC
West Hartford, CT

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Butterfly Bliss Productions LLC
P.O. Box 330482, West Hartford, CT 06133
ButterflyBlissProductions.com
ThriverZone.com
SusanOmilian.com

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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!*

*Cautious, careful people, always casting about to preserve
their reputation and social standing, never can bring about a reform.
Those who are really in earnest must be willing to be anything or nothing
in the world's estimation, and publicly and privately in season and out,
avow their sympathies with despised and persecuted ideas
and their advocates and bear the consequences.*

—**Susan B. Anthony**
Suffragist and Women's Rights Advocate
1820–1906

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Thanks to all those who have helped me tell this story and put it on the page so it can be of benefit to others.

On the publication of this final book in the trilogy of *The Best Revenge Series*TM, I hope that these three books together portray for you the journey from victim to survivor to thriver that each of us will undertake in this lifetime. No matter what struggles we encounter in our lives, we do have the resiliency and strength to move beyond them and find a life of power and purpose.

Thanks in particular to “my readers,” those who have devoured the books in this series enthusiastically, giving me praise as well as great feedback, including many of their “reader’s questions” about the characters and happenings in *Awaken* and *Emerge*, books one and two of the series. Your curiosity has inspired the story here in *Thrive*, book three. I hope I’ve answered all—or most of—your questions!

Thank you to Claudia Volkman for editing these books, and Anita Jones of Another Jones Graphics for the book covers and interior design. Thanks, too, to my cousin, Pam Rossi of Pam Rossi Voice Overs, who has given “voice” to my novels on audiobooks.

Special thanks to Sharon Castlen of Integrated Book Marketing for getting what I do and helping me get it out into the world.

Most of all, I am grateful to the hundreds of survivors I have met over the last twenty years who have had the courage to become “thrivers” and overcome their past to find that living well is indeed the best revenge. You are my inspiration every day.

Let’s keep on thriving!

Susan M. Omilian

Note from the Author

As I noted in *Awaken* and *Emerge*, the first two books in *The Best Revenge Series™*, 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 those books, 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 her family members? Would she ever rest in peace? How would they find a way to move forward without her?

With this book, *Thrive: The Journey of the Human Soul to Discover a Life of Purpose*, set twenty years after the death of Lacey, my fictional main character, I continue to explore those intriguing questions as well as others. Can Lacey’s friends find a life of power and purpose after such a horrific event? Is that purpose to make the world safer and prevent what happened to Lacey – or is there a broader purpose? Can it be accomplished in twenty years, or will it have to wait for a future generation?

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 2022, 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 virally on social media in the United States and around the world. It immediately made the public more aware that incidents of sexual assault, domestic violence, and sexual harassment were still very widespread and prevalent in our society. It also created greater empathy for the victims—mostly female—and a better understanding of the impact of these crimes on them physically, financially, and emotionally.

The impact of violence on women and girls that the fictional *Emerge* story describes in 2009 was eight years before the #Me-Too Movement exploded and terms like “trauma-informed care” and “survivor-centered services” entered the public discourse. In *Thrive*, the fictional characters face challenges still unmet in 2019 such as misogyny, gun violence, and the onset of a world-wide COVID-19 virus pandemic.

It has been my dream since I was a little girl to write novels with amazing characters and powerful plotlines that people will love. I hope this series of books, first *Awaken*, then *Emerge*, and finally *Thrive*, measures up to that dream. True, I didn’t wish for something so tragic and sad as the death of my niece Maggie to happen. 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 celebrate her life each day by living well—living my best life. I hope this book and its story will inspire you to do the same.

Susan M. Omilian

Go confidently in the direction of your dreams.

Live the life you imagined.

—Henry David Thoreau

Life isn't about finding yourself.

Life is about creating yourself.

—George Bernard Shaw

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Living well is the best revenge.

—George Herbert

The meaning of life is to find your gift.

The purpose of life is to give it away.

—Pablo Picasso

*There are two powers in the world;
one is the sword
and the other is the pen.*

*There is a third power stronger than both,
that of women.*

—Malala Yousafzai

PROLOGUE

October 26, 1999

A Shamanic Journey: Dreams from My Mother

With the insistent beat of Radiance's shamanic drumming, Lisette felt herself being lifted above the chaotic rabble of her own life and pulled into a different time and space.

To reach the Upper World, Radiance had told her to go to a high place that was familiar to her, and to her amazement, Lisette found herself in the mountains of Peru. That she went to the ancient city of Machu Picchu didn't surprise her. When she was a little girl, she and her mother had poured over picture books about this place. Lisette knew it well.

But Lisette didn't linger long there. As Radiance had told her to expect, she soon felt herself go up higher above the cloud line now, into a space she'd never seen before until she found herself in a deep, dark forest, green and fresh all around her. The only noise in this peaceful, quiet place was the gentle sound of water gurgling in a bubbling brook that flowed down through the piles of rocks at her feet. At first, she didn't notice a woman sitting on a rock a few feet away. She was dressed in a long, flowing green gown, the hues of which blended into the woods around her. When Lisette finally noticed her, Lisette exclaimed, "Oh my! Who are you?"

"I'm here to greet you," the woman said in a soft, friendly voice.

“But how did you know I was coming?”

“It is as it should be,” the woman said, but her words confused Lisette.

“Are you my teacher?” she asked. “I could use some help.”

In response, the woman stood, and a flock of birds gathered around her, lifting her up into the air. Lisette watched in amazement. Before she knew it, another flock of birds swarmed around her and lifted her up too. Suddenly Lisette was in the sky, flying over a canyon with such speed that the wind whipped her hair up so it trailed after her like a tail. Then the birds steered her down to the floor of the canyon, where that same woman in green was already waiting for her. The birds gently put her down and flew off in a clatter.

Lisette looked anxiously at the woman. “Where are we now? What is this place?”

“You’ll recognize it in a minute,” the woman replied as she led Lisette toward something far off in the distance. As they walked toward it, Lisette couldn’t believe what she saw.

“That’s the trailer I lived in with my mom!” she exclaimed. “What the hell is it doing here?”

Lisette rushed toward it, terrified that it would be just as she had left it – on the day of her sixteenth birthday and Ralph would still be living there with her.

So she turned and asked, “Is this a dream? It feels like a nightmare!”

“It’s a waking dream. A chance for you to review your life’s lessons.”

“Oh, no!” Lisette snapped back. “That’s not going to happen! The only thing I learned in that trailer was that I didn’t want to be there.”

“Then that’s an excellent lesson to learn.” The woman leaned closer. “Take a look inside. There’s something there for you to see.”

Prologue

Lisette was leery about that. Radiance had told her that she hadn't come to the Upper World to find her mother, but if the thing she had to see was in the trailer, she had to go see it.

She walked up to the trailer and stood on her tiptoes so she could peek inside. It was amazing! Everything was painted a bright pink, and huge red-and-white peppermint sticks, her favorite candy, were hanging from the ceiling. Then there were all the toys, dolls, and playthings she had ever wanted. In the middle of it all sat a girl in a bright red dress, much like a dress like Lisette had wanted but her mother couldn't afford to buy her. The girl looked so happy! She had everything Lisette could ever have wanted.

Then the girl looked up at her, smiled, and waved her inside. Lisette felt a shiver run through her.

"Who is this girl?" she asked the woman. "What does she want from me?"

"The girl is you," the woman told her.

"She is not!" Lisette shot back. "My childhood was nothing like that!"

"Even if it weren't, you could still enjoy it now. Why don't you go inside?"

Lisette scowled, but she was curious. She opened the door, and as she stepped inside, the sweet smell of sugar hit her. The girl in the red dress was sitting on a chair in the middle of it all, eating candy from a bag.

She grinned at Lisette and asked, "Do you want some?" She held out the bag. "The red gumdrops are the best!"

Lisette's eyes grew big. She loved red gumdrops—yes, they were her favorites. Eagerly, she put out her hand, and the girl poured some candy into it. Lisette popped a piece in her mouth, and as she chewed it, a wild, wonderful flavor filled her mouth.

"These are amazing!" she exclaimed, tossing the rest in her mouth. Then she put her hand out for more. "I love candy! My mother used to get mad at me when I was a kid! She'd say . . ."

"Be careful, baby," a voice called out from behind her. "You'll get a tummy ache if you eat too much!"

Lisette knew that voice. She whirled around to see her mother.

"It's you! You *are* here!" But her mother looked so different! She was young, happy, and so full of life. Lisette wanted to touch her again. Did she dare try?

As if knowing her fear, her mother took Lisette's hand, pulled her close, and hugged her. Closing her eyes, Lisette let herself feel what it was like to be so close to her mother again. It was wonderful!

"Oh, Mommy, Mommy!" she said, sighing. "I've missed you so much!"

"Yes, my baby!" Her mother said, rocking Lisette in her arms. "I've missed you too. It's been a very long time!" Then her mother released her and held her at arm's length as she beamed. "Look at you! You are all grown up!"

"You look great too, Mom," Lisette gushed.

"I look pretty damn good, don't I? This place agrees with me."

"But what is this place? Where am I, and who is that girl?"

"That's simple. The girl is you."

"But I wasn't that happy, and our trailer wasn't the Candy Land Express!"

Her mother sighed. "It wasn't that bad, my darling, was it? I loved you." She touched Lisette's cheek softly. "I've always loved you."

"I know." Lisette's voice cracked as emotions welled up inside her. She couldn't blame her mother for everything that went wrong later in her life, but losing her mother when she was only ten years old had been hard. The cancer had spread fast, and her mother didn't have time to put everything right before she died.

Prologue

"I wanted to come back and have you feel my presence sooner," her mother went on, "but I had to heal first and get stronger."

Lisette didn't know what to say. She was happy that her mother had healed, but in the meantime, she had been stuck living with Ralph. Then, as if her mother had read her mind, she added, "After I died, you went through hell, didn't you?"

"Oh, no, it wasn't so bad," Lisette lied, holding back her tears.

"But you see, Ralph was the only one I could leave you with," her mother said, gently pushing a loose strand of hair from Lisette's face. "Ralph was the only one who would love you because he was the only one who loved me."

Ralph loved someone! Lisette was shocked at the thought.

"I know you don't believe that, but in the end, he was the one who kept you out of jail for trying to kill him, right?"

"But Ralph didn't do that because he loved me," Lisette insisted. "He did it because . . ." Lisette's voice suddenly dropped off, and she was lost in thought. Then suddenly it came to her.

"*You* made him do it," Lisette said excitedly. "It was you, wasn't it? How did you do that? Why did you . . ."

"Don't try to figure it out," her mother said softly. "All you need to know is that I never left you and never will. I've been trying to tell you this for a long time, but you haven't been listening. It's been better, hasn't it, since Lacey has been with you?"

"You know about Lacey?" Lisette interrupted.

"Of course!" Her mother smiled. "I told you—I'm always with you. It's not for you to figure out. It's for you to live your life in the present. To live in the most conscious, purposeful way you can."

Lisette was confused. What was her mother talking about?

"Look, it's simple," her mother went on. "There is a reason you came into this world. There is something you can do that no one else can. You need to figure out what that is. It's your purpose in this lifetime, and then you must go do it."

"I don't know what that is," Lisette said, shrugging her shoulders. "I guess I could learn to read better. That might help and be a start."

Her mother's face broke into a big smile. "I remember how you loved reading all those books about Machu Picchu with me."

Lisette's face brightened. "I miss that. I don't read very much anymore."

"Why not?"

Lisette didn't know what to say. She had come up with reasons before, like she stopped reading because she was mad at her mother for dying and leaving her alone, but now those felt so childish that she couldn't even tell her mother.

"Oh, don't worry," her mother went on. "You're just out of practice. You'll learn it again. You always loved to learn. Just the other day you were reading about Atilla the Hun. That was good. Good for your new business venture."

Lisette stared at her in amazement. "How do you know about that?" Suddenly Lisette was interrupted by the sound of the drums beating softly but insistently.

"It's time to go." The woman in green was standing now at the trailer door, warning her. "The drums are calling you back. Remember, you have to go back when the drums call."

"But I don't want to," Lisette wailed. "I want to stay here. I have so many things to ask my mom. I still need to find out . . ."

"It's okay," her mother said gently. "Listen for me in the wind. I'll be there."

"I don't get it. What wind? Where?" Lisette could feel herself unraveling. She couldn't think of a time since her mother died that she hadn't felt lonely and scared. She needed her mother. How could she leave now? There must be something she could do!

"No, baby," her mother said. "Go now. Trust that you will see me again. Remember, never give up and always believe in yourself."

Prologue

Can you do that for me?"

"But can't I stay a little longer? I didn't think you'd be here. I didn't believe it was possible."

"Then that's the lesson you've learned. Everything is possible, and you must keep your promise to return."

"Will I see you again?" Lisette asked, but the final call of the drums sounded—four long, hard beats.

"I love you, Mommy," she cried out. "I have to go!"



PART ONE: The Journey

CHAPTER ONE

October 23, 2009

Finding Home

“All right!” Sophie exclaimed to Lissette. “You’re staying! Best news I’ve had all week.”

With that, the two women raised their wine glasses in a celebratory toast and then grinned and giggled like schoolgirls. Before this, the best thing going that afternoon for Sophie was the long, leisurely lunch she was having with Lissette, sitting out on the deck of her favorite restaurant on a warm afternoon in late October. It was the first time she had relaxed since the Tenth Anniversary Celebration Gala last week marking a decade since Lacey’s death. That event had had more than its share of unexpected surprises.

For one, Ambrose, a ne’er-do-well homeless man as far as Sophie was concerned, had fallen off a catwalk in the backstage area of a hotel auditorium in the middle of the event. That would have been bad enough, but as he descended on the crowd, he screamed an obscenity and the governor’s name, which sent her security team into a frenzy. Once they rushed Governor Jenny Jablonski out of the area, it was the end of a potentially successful fundraising weekend for her organization, *SISTER—Survivor Strong, Thriver Resilient*. Of course, the saving grace of the weekend was that her friend Lissette had a tender meeting with Brad Bufford, a man Lissette never knew was her real dad. She also

reconnected with Erick, her on-again, off-again boyfriend whom she hadn't seen in ten years.

Not that Sophie hadn't planned—or maybe she could call it encouraged—Erick and Lisette coming back together from the moment Lisette had agreed to come from Los Angeles, where she was living, to attend the gala. Now, since Lisette had just announced to her at lunch that she was staying in town, Sophie wasn't sure whether that was to be with Erick or to spend some time with her biological dad who'd been absent in her life for almost thirty years. She hoped it was both, and she also hoped that Lisette might even consider helping her with *SISTER*, the work she did with survivors of abuse in honor and memory of Lacey, Sophie's best friend and college roommate. Whatever it meant, Sophie was just happy.

"I'm so excited you're not going back," she squealed. "I had a feeling about this with the way you and Erick have been canoodling around."

Lisette gave her a puzzled look. "What's canoodling?" Then she added quickly, "And how is it spelled?"

Before Sophie could respond, Lisette whipped out a notebook, slapped it on the table, and sat there with a pen, poised to write.

Confused, Sophie had to think fast. "I think it's *C-A-N-O-O-D-L-I-N-G*. It means you're hanging out with someone hugging and kissing them. Having lots of "hot sex!"

"Really?" Lisette shot back. "There's a word for that?"

"Yeah, but what's the deal with the notebook? Are you taking notes on me? Only students are allowed to do that in class!"

"It's just something my dad thought would be good for me to do. You know he's helping me to read better. So, he says that if I hear a word I don't know or see it somewhere, I should write it down in my notebook and look it up later. Then when we meet for my lesson, we go over the list, and I practice spelling the words and using them in a sentence."

Sophie was smiling now, inside and out. “So, this is what you and your dad are doing together, huh? Of course, I know him more formally as Brad Bufford, first ‘gentleman’ of the state and husband of our governor,” she said.

“We are not ‘canoodling’ together, that’s for sure,” Lisette said with a laugh. “But yeah, it’s been great hanging with him. He’s so different from Ralph, the fake dad I used to have to deal with. And I love Jenny too—my new stepmom. She’s amazing!”

“*Hmmm*. That’s the first time I’ve heard you talk about Ralph since you’ve been back here. Are you even in touch with him anymore?” Sophie paused for a moment and then screwed up her face and blurted out, “Shouldn’t he be dead by now?”

Sophie wasn’t trying to be tacky, but she knew Ralph’s health wasn’t good after having been badly injured in a fire at his bar years ago, a topic Lisette didn’t like to talk about or be reminded of for a variety of reasons.

“No,” Lisette said calmly. “I haven’t seen Ralph since Sandy, my social worker when I was at the Susan B. Anthony Home for Girls, made me go see him to forgive him for all the bad things he did to me as a kid. She said that carrying around all that anger wasn’t doing me any good. Now I don’t even think about him. I’ve moved on.”

“That’s good. But let’s get back to Erick.”

“Why are you so interested in what’s happening between me and Erick?”

“A girl needs to know, right?” Sophie said, giggling. “So, have you two made any plans? You know, like living together, getting engaged, getting married, and having kids?”

“Hey! Slow down. We just reconnected after ten years. We haven’t gotten that far yet, if we ever will.”

“But you’ve been talking about it, right? Like some ‘pillow talk?’”

Lisette screwed up her face and asked, “What’s ‘pillow talk?’”

How do you . . .?”

“ . . . spell it?” Sophie finished Lisette’s sentence. “Are you going to do this all through lunch? Wow, I’m really going to have to watch my vocabulary.”

Without missing a beat, Lisette started to ask, “What’s vocab—”

That’s when Sophie stopped her. “Look, let’s do the spelling bee later, okay? Here’s what I need to know. Now that you’ve decided to stay, what are you going to do about your business back in LA? Can you run it from here?”

Lisette smiled. “Yeah, in between all of our canoodling, the one thing Erick and I have talked about is business. Erick actually likes that crazy idea Ambrose came up with when he was trying to get Brad and me to give him a lot of money and if we did, we’d get to read my mom’s diary and find out how we were actually related to each other.

“Yeah, yeah, I know all about how Ambrose tried to hustle you both,” Sophie said, jumping in before Lisette launched into the whole convoluted story of what went on before, during, and after the Tenth Anniversary Gala. “But what was his idea?”

“Oh, he thought I could start a business offering pole dancing lessons to women for exercise. Strippers have done pole dancing for years, and women, young and old, could use it as exercise to get themselves stronger and keep going longer. Pole dancing studios are popping up all over, and Erick thinks it would be a good move for me. It could get me away from strip clubs and into the fitness business that he’s in.”

“That’s right! Erick has a gym that he owns. God, I could use some exercise, something to make me strong and increase my stamina.”

As Sophie spoke that last word, she watched Lisette’s face twitch as she struggled to write something down in her notebook.

“Yes, the word is *stamina*,” Sophie continued. “It’s spelled

S-T-A-M-I-N-A. It's like when you run a long marathon without tiring. You can do that in your mind too—build your resiliency so you can face a lot of hard things in your life and still bounce back." Then Sophie winced. "Sorry, I keep dumping all these new, big words on you!"

"No, no, it's okay. I liked what you said about bouncing back from stuff. I've done that a lot in my lifetime, right?"

"Yes. You are very resilient. But I want to know what you think of Ambrose's-now-Erick's idea. Is that something you want to do—help Erick build out his gym with a pole dancing studio? Is that enough for you to really sink your teeth into? I mean, is it your passion and purpose in life? That's what you need to figure out here!"

Wow! Sophie could tell that the last part of what she just said got Lisette's attention because she jumped right back into the conversation, talking really fast.

"My mom talked about finding my purpose in life when I did that shamanic journey with Radiance right after Lacey died. Mom said to live in the present, not the past, and then find something good to do with my life."

Lisette leaned forward now closer to Sophie, her voice filled with wonder as she continued. "Mom made it sound so great, too. She said, 'Honey, there is something you can do that no one else can. You need to figure out what that is and go do it.' Is that what you mean, Sophie?"

"Yeah, exactly. So, what is your purpose in life, do you think?"

"I don't know. At that moment with my mom, all I could think of was to learn to read better." Lisette scrunched up her face as if that idea wasn't so great after all.

"That's not a bad idea," Sophie assured her. "You might even write a book one day about finding your passion and the journey your mom was talking about. You could do that, right?"

“Write a book? *Me?* I can’t even read that good, let alone write a book! That can’t be my purpose! There has to be something else. I have done some good stuff in my life so far. When I went back to LA after Lacey’s death, I started that business, giving my stage name ‘Attila the Hunny’ to a chain of high-class strip clubs for men. It has been good for me because they paid me to use my name, and I make sure the girls are treated better in those clubs than I ever was as a stripper. I also donate a lot of my profits in the business to support your work, Sophie. But I’m not sure that’s good enough.”

“Yeah, that was a good thing. SISTER was able to grow by leaps and bounds because of it, but just giving away money doesn’t feel like your passion in life. Not the way your mom meant it. What did she say? ‘Something you can do that no one else can’? In my workshops, I call it ‘manifesting a life of power and purpose.’”

Lisette sighed. “Yeah, those workshops and SISTER are your purpose in life, aren’t they? You figured it out! Why can’t I? I’m amazed at all you have accomplished so far. You got SISTER set up, raised enough money so you could work part-time at SISTER and teach at the college too. And before that, you got a law degree. I didn’t even get through high school! How did you come up with all of this?”

“Starting SISTER was simple,” Sophie said with a wicked grin. “You remember how angry I was about what Ari did to Lacey. I had to turn that anger into something positive or it was going to kill me. Since Lacey didn’t have a chance to survive and move forward with her life, I wanted to help other women who could. With my workshops, I’ve taken all that energy and turned it into a passion to help others take the journey from victim to survivor—and then to thriver.”

Lisette giggled. “I’ve never heard of that word *thriver* before. Where did you get it?”

"I don't know. Like so much of this, it just came to me, like I was guided to it. But when the women come to the workshop and they hear the word *thriver*, they love it. They want to be that, and not quit until they get there!"

Lisette laughed. "That sounds like me and my dad when he's helping me with my reading and writing. He's totally into it. He says I'm not 'illiterate'—that's the word he used—but a 'functionally illiterate' person. That means I've been taught to read and write, but I'm not reading or writing at my best. I always thought I stopped trying to read when my mom died. Before that we'd always read stuff together, and she was teaching me what we called 'big words' every day. But I haven't been the same since she died. Brad thinks he can get me going at my reading and writing again, though." Lisette giggled again. "Men! They think they can do anything even if they can't!"

"But that's good for you," Sophie reassured her. "It's time you had a dad looking out for you, and he seems to love it. He needs something to focus on now that his shopping mall design business has gone south after the shooting last week at the Westingham Mall, his current project. And the shooter was none other than Ambrose's son, Mark. Can you believe that? Ambrose scared us all with his hair-brained stunt at the gala—and just days later, his son shot and killed ten people at that mall."

"I know. Ambrose really is a mess, isn't he? But I feel sorry for them both," Lisette said quietly. "Ambrose really does love his son and is worried about him. He even called me to see if I'd go with him to the jail to talk to his son."

"You're not going to do that, right?" Sophie jumped in. "Everyone knows Brad is your father and Jenny, your stepmother, is the governor. If word gets out that you visited . . ."

"Don't worry, Sophie," Lisette interrupted. "I won't do anything

stupid. But it's good that Ambrose is thinking about his son and trying to help him out of this mess."

"It was one of their own making though," Sophie replied. "Just remember, having that father and son duo be your life's purpose is definitely not what your mother had in mind!"

"I know, I know. But between me and Ambrose wasn't all bad stuff. Sure, he did do some pretty mean things to me, like take my mother's diary and not tell me that Brad was my real dad. And yes, it all got played out in public, but it turned out okay, right? I found Brad, and Erick and I got back together, so it's all good."

"I'll say it has," Sophie said, her eyes glistening with envy. "Good for you and Erick too. He is such a great guy."

"Yeah, he is," Lisette said softly. Just then, someone came up behind Lisette, reached around, and planted a big kiss on her cheek.

"Are you talking about me, Sophie? Am I that great guy?" a man's voice said as he pulled out the chair next to Lisette, sat down, and gave her shoulders a squeeze.

"Erick!" Lisette exclaimed. "What are you doing here?"

Then another man's voice chimed in. "What are we both doing here, right, Erick?"

Lisette looked up and saw Brad quickly grab another chair from a nearby table and sit down next to her on the other side.

"Dad! I thought you had a business meeting. Are you two goofing off?"

"No," Brad replied. "Remember, the other day Jenny said she wanted to see Erick's gym? I took her over there this morning, and we tried out every piece of exercise equipment in the place, didn't we, Erick? It was great! Then she had to go back to work, governing and crazy stuff like that. So Erick and I thought we'd go find out where the prettiest girl in town was lunching today."

"Flattery will get you everywhere," Lisette said with a grin, but then she gave Sophie a look. "So you told them where we were going to lunch?"

Sophie smiled wickedly, trying to look unshaken even though she had been unmasked here. "I told Erick that maybe he'd swing by toward the end of lunch and make sure I had convinced you to come to my workshop. I know you'd love it. You've given so much to the SISTER organization. I want you to see the work we're doing."

"And have you been convinced, honey?" Erick said, jumping in. "I agree. You'd love it."

"Geeze," Lisette said wearily. "So that's what this whole gathering is all about?"

"Of course not!" Sophie insisted. "We did talk about deep things, like finding your purpose in life. So maybe something in the workshop might help you with that . . . that . . . what did you call it—'something I can do that, right now, no one else can.'"

Lisette sighed and looked at Erick. "And what were you planning to do to convince me, hon?" She used that last endearing word with a little less endearment.

"I'm part of the SISTER team now, heading up its Male Initiative, and I agree with Sophie. Go to the workshop and see what it's all about. Your money supports it. We support you. It can't be as bad as you told me last night."

"What's bad about it?" Sophie asked quickly. "If there is a reason why you can't attend, I know we can work it out."

"Well," Lisette said hesitantly, and then looked at Erick. "I've heard you have the women in the workshops do a lot of writing and then they read what they wrote in the group. I just don't feel good about doing that right now. I'm working with Dad on my reading and writing, but I don't think I'll be ready that soon."

Brad looked at Sophie and asked, "When is your next workshop? How much time do we have?"

"It's next month on the two Saturdays in November before Thanksgiving."

"A couple of weeks? No problem!" Brad sputtered. "This is great, Lisette. It'll give you something to work toward. Look how much you've picked up already."

"Right!" Sophie jumped in again, "and some of my students will be there to help make it feel comfortable for you. They'd love to meet you. You are their role model as a woman in business. They want to be like you when they get out of college."

"Oh no," Lisette protested. "I'm far from a role model. Dad and I were just talking about that the other day. I consider all of you my role models! You're all doing great things and have a purpose in life. I hardly know what I'm doing."

"You know a lot," Erick jumped in. "And you'll get where you want to go, honey. Maybe with Sophie's workshop you'll get there sooner. You can try!"

As Lisette looked at the smiling, happy faces around the table, she had to admit she was lucky to have all of them cheering her on.

"All right!" she said, giving in. "Sign me up for the workshop, Sophie. But I don't want to stand out. I want to be like all the other women there. No big deal, okay?"

"You've got it," Sophie said with a grin.

Brad and Erick nodded their approval, and as Lisette looked around the table, she felt happy. Maybe she could really belong here.

But before things got too mushy, Brad shouted, "Who's for dessert?"

He raised his hand to signal a waiter and then said in a low whisper to those around the table, "Quick! Let's get dessert before my security team gets antsy and wants me back at the governor's

mansion. They've been on edge ever since Ambrose played that stunt at the gala and everyone decided it was a threat on Jenny's life. It didn't go unnoticed that Ambrose's son was the shooter at the shopping mall where I had my largest business contract."

Sophie sighed. "Maybe it was better, Erick, that I couldn't convince Howie, Lacey's dad, to come mark the tenth anniversary with us at the gala. All that commotion Ambrose caused that night would have freaked him out for sure."

Then she paused for a moment and spoke as if just to herself. "It would have completed the circle, though—all the most important people in Lacey's life being there." Then she added with a sigh, "Except for one."

"You mean Jack, right?" Lisette asked. "Jack is the guy Lacey was dancing with at the Keg the night that got Ari all riled up, wasn't he?"

"Yes," Sophie whispered and then went on, holding Lisette's eyes. "Not sure where he is. Maybe it's best we leave him alone, dealing with what he's dealing with. I'm sure he'll let us know if he needs something."

Then with a sigh, she added, "I guess Lacey will see to that."



By the time Lisette met on Monday for her lesson with Brad after her Friday lunch with Sophie, he had already come up with what he told her was a "speed reading" lesson to get her ready for the first day of Sophie's workshop next month.

"Geez, Dad!" Lisette exclaimed, when he showed her all the reading charts and writing exercises he had ready for her. "You are really good at this. You could be a full-time literacy volunteer!"

Erick was really supportive of Lisette, too. They had picked up their relationship just where it had left off ten years ago when she had walked out on him in a huff. For years, Lisette had regretted how she had so brutally broken up with Erick back then and

maybe missed the chance to be happy with him for the last ten years. But as they had discussed one night in their “after-sex” time, maybe it was good that they both had time to sort out who and what they were before they really became a couple. They needed time to miss and appreciate each other more for when they did get back together.

For one thing, she found Erick’s way of living very easy for her to fall into. He was calm and cool, and he got what Sophie was doing with her workshops. And he totally supported Lisette finding what she was destined to do.

“We should all find a purpose in our lives,” he said to her. “And look at all you’ve accomplished so far. You got through a lot of hard stuff and are still standing!”

The more Lisette thought about this, the more she wondered if her journey to find purpose in her life had started long before she encountered Lacey’s spirit or met Sophie, Eric, or Brad. Maybe it started with what had happened to her earlier. A victim of abuse and neglect by Ralph, Lisette knew how much she was robbed of in her childhood. Her mom was the best ever, but she died of cancer when Lisette was only ten years old. After that she was “raised” (if you want to call it that) by Ralph, the man she thought was her real father for a long, long time.

Lisette could see that while she survived all that happened to her as a kid and even what she did to Ralph on the day of her sixteen birthday, what really put her life into a tailspin was coming to this town to dance at the Bare Bottom strip club near the college campus where Lacey was shot and killed by Ari on October 17, 1999. Having Lacey’s spirit—caught between the two worlds after such a sudden, violent death—come into her body that night while she was being mobbed on stage by the college kids in the audience was what led her to all that was unfolding right now, ten years later.

it was Erick, the club's bouncer who got her safely off stage that night, but when she was confronted near her dressing room by a guy with a knife, it was there she first felt Lacey's spirit inside her, guiding her to safety. Then she met Sophie, Lacey's best friend, who led her to Radiance, the shaman, who got Lacey's spirit to leave her body and cross over into paradise where Lacey's mother, Marg, was waiting for her. Lisette knew that all this would sound crazy to some people in her life, but she believed it all and cared about these people—Erick, Sophie, and Radiance—who seemed to care about her. Now, after meeting Brad, her real dad at last week's gala that honored Lacey and her legacy, Lisette had all the more reason to stay.

It was an opportunity to grow, expand, and meet new people, and today she was taking on one of the most important projects in her life: learning to read and write better with a great literacy coach, her dad. He was helping her to get ready to take Sophie's workshop, but Lisette knew it was about more than taking the workshop. After talking with Sophie the other day, she wanted to be like Sophie . . . so smart, so daring. She loved how Sophie had come up with the whole idea of her nonprofit SISTER organization to sponsor and support *My Avenging Angel Workshops™* based on the idea that "living well is the best revenge." Since Ari killed Lacey and then himself, there was no way for those who loved Lacey to avenge Lacey's murder by getting him arrested and sent to jail for what he did. Instead, Sophie thought living well would be the best revenge and believed that something good would come out of what was horrifying and senseless.

Lisette wanted to be a part of what Sophie was doing, and she also wanted to be with Erick and work with him. He was smart like Sophie, and over the last ten years, he had successfully built a solid business with his gym. Now Lisette and Erick were talking about adding pole dancing classes and bringing in the right equipment

and enough space so everyone stayed safe. Some nights they'd lie in bed during their "after-sex" time and talk about the people they admired and how they inspired them to do the things they both wanted to accomplish.

It was all part of what Lisette and her dad had talked about one afternoon in her literacy coaching session. Brad spelled out the two words to add to her list.

"R-O-L-E M-O-D-E-L-S. You know what I mean, right?" he said. "A role model is someone whom you look up to and admire, someone you want to be like. They inspire you to be more than you are and by their example, you get to be better than you thought you could be. They are the heroes you look up to in your darkest moments."

"Okay, then if that's true," Lisette said with a sparkle in her eyes, "you are my role model, Dad. I admire how you took me in as your daughter without question and are here for me in every way possible. Jenny too—she is amazing. I never met a woman like her before, at least not so up close. Even though she has all that power, she is a nice, good person."

What Lisette didn't say that day to Brad was how few role models she had for how good men act. Erick definitely was one of the good guys, and so was Brad. She loved how Brad and Jenny supported each other and were a team. She wondered if she and Erick could be such a team, too, making a life for themselves and maybe have children. What was she thinking? She never even wanted kids, not even a dog. Was she getting ahead of herself?

But she could see the possibility of a life with Erick and being able to help Sophie with her work, so attending the workshop was the place for her to start. She had to be brave. Otherwise she'd never find out if what the women said about the workshops was really true. Their comments were posted on the *SISTER* website.

“Attending Sophie’s workshop made a huge shift in my mindset. Sophie reminded me that I am unique, valuable, and worthy. She gave me confidence to move beyond surviving, instilling in me the hope of an abundant and successful future as a thriver! I know that my best life is yet to come.” —Gracie

“Sophie’s workshops provide a safe environment where you can share feelings and feel supported. Your heart opens to possibilities and hope for the future.” —Serena

“Sophie has helped me to learn how to search within myself to determine what I want out of life and how to set goals that enable me to take the steps necessary to reach them without feeling overwhelmed and too frightened to do anything.” —Adele

“This workshop has totally changed my life. Sophie has started me on a journey to find the person I most want to be, and with the exercises she has presented, she is visually showing me how to get there.” —Sherilee

Maybe going to the workshop could help Lisette figure out her next steps here and find what her mother had guided her to do years ago: find her purpose in life.

Her dad was by far the wisest about all this, Lisette decided. He said to be brave, be bold, and “if you can be as fierce and fearless as Attila the Hunny on the stage, you can do anything.”

And he had other words of wisdom for her. “Don’t worry what other people think about your reading and writing. You are making progress here,” he said to her the last time they met before the first workshop session. “Most of them don’t realize what you are going through to learn this now. They probably got it all handed to them at a very young age and don’t appreciate it. But you

do. You know the value and you will get there. Take it slow, and you'll get there, okay?"

Beside his guidance as her literacy coach, what she appreciated most about Brad was that he gave her a feeling that she was already a thriver. She had a father who was there to love and take care of her, no matter what she needed. He gave her confidence and believed that she could do anything she tried. That's how her mother, Marie, was too—always positive, always moving forward.

Lisette wondered, *What if Brad and Marie had stayed together?* What if they had raised Lisette together? How would that have changed her life? Would her mother still be alive today? Would Lisette have ever met Sophie or Erick or known about Lacey? But she couldn't change any of that now.

Thriving—that's what she wanted to do! Lisette never knew there was a word for it, but now she knew that thriving was more than surviving and that's what she wanted to do. There was one more thing Sophie had told her about the workshop that intrigued her. She told Lisette that she was the hero of her own story! *Imagine that*, Lisette thought. *So everyone else is the hero of their own story too. What if there was some way to write down these stories and inspire others to take the journey too?*

That sounded like a book idea to Lisette, and she wondered if that was what her mom meant when she said there was something Lisette could do that no one else could.

True, she wanted to find her purpose in life. Lately she'd been thinking it was to help women find true happiness in their lives. Would writing a book help her do that? It could be a start.

Wouldn't that be great?

