

A Grip on Reality

Prologue

Making days happy, that's what you do

With your warm, loving ways and your thoughtfulness too ...

You're caring and kindness, full of laughter and fun

Treasured so dearly by everyone ...

You always have time to give and to share

Don't have to be asked ... when you're needed, you're there!

Couldn't have said it better myself, Mum.

Thanks for always being there for me (and for us), love Nicole

Mother's Day 2015.

Tears welled in my eyes as I contemplated the essence of this message. Life serves up many challenges along our journey. It's up to us how we choose to grow through these experiences. As I move towards my twilight years, reflecting upon my pathway, I embrace the wisdom and compassion it has offered me.

I bask in my joy and contentment, knowing from those dearest to me that I am fulfilling my role as a loving mother, a happy and fun-filled friend, and a respected role model for my grandchildren whom I love so dearly.

I invite you to share my first half century.

Chapter 1

Farewell Sydney Town

The fragile pink streamer broke.

This is it, Janet Ruth. Brace yourself for the adventure of a lifetime.

Standing on the upper deck of the *Ellinis* in my hot pink linen dress, an A-line masterpiece I had sewn myself, I felt quite the “modern miss” staring down at the milling crowd on the dock.

Yet, as that streamer snapped, feelings of both release and loss embraced me. The thin strip had held Mum and I together until the ship slipped away from the wharf.

Now, I gazed at my forlorn mother standing alone in the crowd and my heart sank. I was leaving without her blessing, and it hurt. All I had wanted was Mum's approval.

The green tug puffed a huge bellow of smoke into the still evening sky, and I stood alone, defiant. My thoughts vacillated from fear of the future to raging anger at her solemn farewell. *How had it come to this?*

My relationship with my mother had been a rocky one. No doubt she cared for me in her way, but we were both strong-minded women, and we often found ourselves on opposite ends of an argument. In fact, by the time I decided to leave, arguments with my mother had become a routine part of my life.

Exploring England and Europe had been on my bucket list for years. I was twenty-one years old and, like most girls my age, I dreamt of discovering what lay on the other side of the world. Geographical isolation propelled my lust for adventure and excitement. Besides, I'd just broken up with my boyfriend Keith. After three years – filled as much with romance as the emotional pain of trying to hold onto our relationship – I needed a change of scenery, and this trip seemed the perfect opportunity.

Leaning against the ship's rail, I recalled a similar break toward freedom I had made a few years before when my frustration with what I perceived as my mother's controlling nature had reached its zenith.

Mum had never approved of any of my boyfriends. My first serious boyfriend, Ian, arrived on the scene just after I'd left school at the age of sixteen. Ian was keen to have me as his "steady" girlfriend, and as soon as he made his intentions known, Mum started with her stilted interrogation. Arms folded across her chest, she delivered a barrage of questions.

'What makes you think you are good enough for my daughter?'

'What's your occupation? Salesman – huh, selling what?'

'What does your father do?' Only the strong survived her prickly challenges. I felt mortified. After all, he was a decent person from a respected North Shore family with a vision for his future. He loved his rugby every Saturday afternoon, even if he did swirl a few too many beers after it finished.

Her control choked me. I wanted the same fun and leniency as my girlfriends got from their parents, but I always had to be home by midnight. In retaliation, I became a two-year-old in a teenager's skin, throwing tantrums, yelling, and screaming at her every time Ian's name was mentioned.

'Don't think you can stop me seeing my boyfriend. You'll never win. This is my life, not yours.'

'While you live in my house, you'll do what I tell you,' she bit back.

'I hate you,' I'd scream, slamming the door to my bedroom.

Desperate to escape her grip, I fought head-on, overcoming her midnight curfew by climbing out of my bedroom window to reunite with Ian soon after I'd arrived home.

My love affair with Ian ended in disaster one Saturday night after Mum had banned me from seeing him. I was staying at a girlfriend's place, and I'd snuck off into the city for a night out with Ian.

The screech of brakes – CRUNCH! My head smashed onto the dashboard with a loud thump, my neck cricked. Pain shot through the top of my head like a dagger piercing my skull.

‘Geez, what the hell happened?’ I yelled.

‘No idea. That idiot slammed his brakes on in front of me for no reason. Are you okay?’ he asked as he jumped out to inspect his black MG TD sports car. I buried my head in my hands. Thoughts flashed through my mind like a hurricane out of control. *No – I'm not okay. Does he care? It didn't seem that way as he busily examined his baby. God, what on earth will I tell Mum?*

‘Where did you get that black eye and those bruises on your arm?’ Mum asked the next day.

‘Oh, err ...’ I stuttered. ‘In the dark last night at Melanie's. I bumped into the corner of the doorway.’ I'll never know if she believed me. Did it matter to me? NO. Suffice to say the relationship with Ian ended. She'd won. Again.

A few years later, it was Keith who fell into the category of despised boyfriends, notwithstanding the fact he was a good human being. His widowed mother, Mrs Osborne to me, worked hard to ensure the best for her son. His life had not been easy as his father had died when he was a young boy. His goal, which he achieved many years later, was to be a successful Sydney lawyer. At the time, his ambition to go to university had been derailed by my mother's plans to set him up with a trainee manager's job at Woolworths. Feeling pressured, he accepted the job – mostly, I think, to keep my mother happy. And so, the torment continued.

I admired Keith's sense of duty to his mother. We would spend every Sunday evening with her, savouring her yummy roasts with loads of veggies and steamed spinach – a new culinary delight for me. I enjoyed the stimulating conversation around the table, and she loved having us – the high point in her life every weekend. We'd rush home from the car races or wherever we'd been for the day to make sure we were sitting at the table by 6 pm. This ritual, sometimes difficult to escape, was vital in his mother's monotonous life.

Perhaps my Mum was jealous I'd found a family connection which satisfied my need to belong? Whatever the reason, her attitude toward me became unbearable. So, I packed my belongings and ran away to Mrs Osborne's home to be with Keith. She welcomed me in, and the heavy load lifted – well for a brief time. As I settled into my new home, I had no idea where my scary decision would lead me. The loss of my mother's approval stifled my decision making. Three days later, overcome by guilt, the naughty little girl returned home. Nothing changed.

It was the night after my twenty-first birthday party when, sitting at the dinner table with Mum and Dad, I'd announced I was going overseas with my friends Kathy and Libby. I wanted to explore England and Europe. It was as simple as that.

‘You can't possibly go,’ Mum scolded me, a look of contempt in her vivid blue eyes.

‘Why not? I've saved hard ever since I started working.’

‘A rash decision indeed. Just like that. Take off and leave us here. You only ever think of yourself.’

‘What on earth are you talking about? I don't care what you think,’ I ranted.

A steely silence hung over the room as I forced down my lamb chops. *Why was she always so nasty to me? What did all this mean?*

Looking back, I can see that life had staggered on for Mum, one monotonous day after another. Born and bred in Sydney, she had left school at the age of fourteen, and her sheltered life had not allowed her any real-life experience. Her father worked hard with his nine brothers in the family tannery in Willoughby whilst her mother busied herself with the household chores. She had accepted her lot, never did a day's work in her life, apart from helping her mother in the home until she married.

Her contentment with Dad had dwindled over the years. She had endured her marriage with a sense of duty for as long as I could remember. I see now that the poor thing had never recovered from his love affair with a spunky chick in California during the war. Mum's inability to forgive him imprisoned her. Disappointment continued to plague her when her little war baby peeped out into the big wide world in 1947. A healthy bundle of joy. She had been hoping for Johnny, but Janet arrived. *Perhaps I became the victim of her unhappiness?*

All I remembered was never-ending arguments between my parents, with Mum disappearing into her make-believe world of everything will be alright and me, the little girl, simply not understanding what was going on. An emotionally dysfunctional family? Well yes, I guess you could say that, although, to the outside world, we functioned as a perfectly happy and well-adjusted family unit.

As the days flew by ahead of my departure, an aura of sadness hovered over me. I busied myself organising my passport, buying the ticket, and sorting out the necessities for shipboard life. During those three long weeks, I had nobody at home to turn to.

At first, I harboured some vain hopes that Dad might support my decision to travel abroad. He had always been a much softer touch than Mum.

I thought fondly the long-ago days when he had spent every Sunday morning with Mr Franklin discussing his cymbidium orchids. The continuous caring for them had provided Dad with an escape from facing his emotions.

In later years, I cherished my orchid connection with Dad. I even followed his passion for a while and continued to care for them long after he'd passed away, coaxing them to flower in our all-too-hot conditions on the Sunshine Coast. Some survived and continued to bloom in my back garden for almost fifty years. Eventually, my husband's obsession for these mysterious blighters overshadowed my interest, and I gave up. Now I only have the Phalaenopsis to amuse me. Their magic continues to cast their spell over me every day.

As far as the trip went though, any hopes I had of support from Dad were dashed when he refused to take my side. I remember him saying, 'Jan, you're upsetting your mother with this rash decision.'

Oh, so it's my fault? Night after night, I sat in my bedroom, struggling with my inability to share my excitement with them. Mum's familiar game overpowered my joy.

Finally, December 4, 1968, the day of my departure, arrived. After farewelling Dad before he left for work, I sat on the back patio with Mum. We ate our "last supper" together in silence. I just wanted to get on that ship.

'We'd better get going,' said Mum. 'It's 2 pm, and you can embark anytime this afternoon.'

I grabbed my luggage, shoved my oversized suitcase, crammed full of far too much of everything, into the boot, and jumped into the family car, a pale blue Holden sedan. The drive from our home in Gordon on the north shore to Circular Quay in the centre of Sydney seemed

to take forever. We did not exchange one word. Tears welled in my eyes as I struggled to hide my disappointment. An escape to London felt like the perfect solution to my misery.

A few hours later, with my fingers clinging to the ship's steel railing, I watched the yachts bobbing up and down on one of the most spectacular harbours in the world. The Manly ferry made a few raucous hoots as it manoeuvred its way past our huge liner, and I bade farewell to Sydney's iconic Harbour Bridge and the city's skyscrapers. Surrounded by strangers, I felt alone, and my thoughts drifted like autumn leaves scattered in the air. I knew it was up to me now. I shuddered. It was time to find my travel mates Kathy and Libby.

In the end, they found *me*.

I had known Kathy for many years, as she went to an exclusive girl's school close to mine. Although an only child and a quiet girl, she'd always involved herself in many of our teenage shenanigans.

I didn't know Libby – she was Kathy's friend. She struck me as a free spirit and a happy soul when I had met her to discuss our plans.

While they were eager to see our cabin, I wanted to spend a few more minutes on deck.

'I'll be down soon to unpack,' I assured them.

My heart was on fire as I stood on the deck watching the landmarks of Bradley's Head and North Head slide by. An unfamiliar feeling of freedom crept over me as our ship headed towards the high seas. The reality of having embarked on this unknown journey began to sink in. *Was I a fool to be so impetuous? Was Mum right?* With tears trickling down my cheeks, I wandered down to our cabin.

Space was extremely limited in our tiny cabin on E deck in the bowels of the ship, but somehow, we managed to find places for all our stuff. The adjoining bathroom, in which one could hardly turn around, seemed like real luxury. Bunk beds and one mirror between three of us could present a real challenge, I thought, as I surveyed what would be our bedroom for the next six weeks.

‘It's time to eat,’ said Libby. ‘Let's find the dining room.’

‘Yes, let's go. It all feels a bit weird, but we'll be right. Mystery and adventure, that's what it's all about.’

Little did I know then, what a significant step I'd taken. A new world was about to open up to me.

‘Easy to get lost,’ I muttered over our first meal on board. ‘This ship is gigantic. And look at this elaborate dining room. Pretty swish, eh?’ Massive mahogany tables covered with stiff white linen tablecloths accommodated the large number of passengers in two sittings.

Waiters hovered over us, ready to attend to our every whim. They served us with such aplomb, I felt like a princess. The menu offered a vast array of foods, including some I'd never heard of before.

‘Moussaka – what's that?’

‘No idea,’ Kathy replied.

‘By the way Kathy, why didn't your father come to say goodbye?’

‘Too busy.’

‘Mine didn't come either – what about you, Libby?’

‘Huh, no. Oh well, I guess their work is more important. Let's not get morbid on our first night. A stroll on deck before bed anyone?’

‘No, let's discover everything tomorrow,’ Kathy suggested. ‘I'm shattered. It's been a huge day.’

The hum of the ship's engine, together with the gentle swaying motion, lulled me to sleep.

Next morning over breakfast, we planned our day, determined to embrace ship-board life.

Chapter 2

Going it alone on the Himalaya

Looking back on it now, my decision to sail the high seas to London for almost six weeks seems irrational given my disastrous experience cruising around the Pacific Islands when I was eighteen.

The girlfriend who'd invited me on the ten-day trip pulled out two weeks before our departure date. She had a new man in her life. Well, that ended our friendship.

Unimpressed, I soldiered on, deciding to go it alone on the *Himalaya*, a large P&O ship, with little thought of how I might cope. On that voyage, I struggled to entertain myself and never did find a companion. Looking back on it now, it was a brave move to embark on my first overseas trip alone at such an innocent age.

Our first port of call, Auckland gave me an opportunity to experience a snippet of New Zealand. I opted for a day trip to Rotorua, which turned out to be a wise decision. I wandered around the spectacular thermal baths, fascinated by this strange place. Time lost its meaning as I stood spellbound beside the bubbling mud pools and spouting geysers. A geothermal wonder indeed. My face twisted as the stinking sulphur odour penetrated my nostrils.

On the bus, heading back to the *Himalaya*, my home on the high seas, my mind darted from fear of being alone to being ever hopeful that I would make it on my own. As always, making friends seemed to elude me. Lacking confidence in those days, I didn't even have the guts to strike up a conversation with people sitting around the dinner table.

Misery strangled me as we headed to our next port of call, Fiji. My one day in Suva introduced me to a new culture of marketplaces with Indians flogging their wares. Purchasing a transistor radio became quite an ordeal, considering my time constraints and desire to see as much of the island as possible during our brief stop-over.

My first attempt at bargaining would not be my last. Many years later in Bangkok, I became obsessed with buying a watch for almost less than what it would have cost the poor guy to buy it. The Indians had trained me well. *Or does my thriftiness come from my Germanic heritage? Or perhaps I'm just downright mean? Hope it's not the latter.*

As for Noumea, our last stop, all I remember was everyone speaking French. The place didn't impress me as I can't even remember what I did.

My most vivid memory of that holiday was the loneliness I endured for ten days. It still plagues me today whenever I contemplate the idea of taking another cruise alone.

In fact, that strong sense of loneliness and isolation seems to have been with me since my early childhood years. And thinking back on its beginnings brings to mind a mishmash of fun times and struggles.

As an innocent tiny tot at Willoughby Primary School, I made friends easily. I attended Sunday School at the local Anglican Church with my friends Kathleen and Suzanne. I shared many years of birthday parties and fun times with these two girls.

The three of us, aged four, took part in the annual concert. I featured as a little snowdrop, my skinny legs quivering below the white crape dress Mum had made. I delivered my one liner in a voice so timid that I doubt anyone heard a word.

I now believe all those years at Sunday School shrouded me in a false sense of security, thinking that the world is perfect, and God saves us. Singing my favourite hymn “Build on the Rock” each week reinforced this belief.

One friendship that stood the test of time bloomed between Sari and me when we were just three years old. She was my “best friend” and remained my loyal companion despite the

fact that we went to different schools. We were a good match, both carrying the same solitary load.

The days we spent hanging off the back of the canoe or swimming as tiny tots in the still waters of Tuggerah Lakes with my golden cocker spaniel Sunny and little Lindy, Sari's faithful Corgi, have become some of my most treasured childhood memories. Holidays spent together in a friend's holiday home at Norah Heads on the Central Coast of New South Wales (NSW) became an annual event for a number of years. Simple and carefree fun.

We'd play our girly games at each other's houses after school, and at five o'clock each day, it was time to part. It took us over half an hour to say our farewells. We'd wander back and forth like two old drunks, each time getting a little closer to our respective homes. Those were the days when young kids could walk the streets with a measure of safety, and our parents didn't fuss like helicopter parents. Eventually, one of us would disappear around the corner and out of sight. We just couldn't say that final goodbye. Sari was a very special friend to me and still is.

In later years, I found myself wandering from one school friend to the next. Always the outsider – the third side of the triangle. And all the while, my search for friends festered like a boil about to burst.

I realise now that my incessant search for approval assured me of a tricky path through primary school and adolescence. I can clearly recall a few incidents in my earlier years at school that didn't exactly help to boost my confidence.

The first of these involved an overpowering obese woman named Mrs Bradley. To this day, that hot summer lunchtime in grade two still sticks in my mind. Lined up on the soft asphalt for some minor misdemeanour, I trembled from head to toe as I awaited my fate. She came up behind me with a ruler – OUCH – my legs stung. I'll never forget the humiliation.

Another lasting trauma happened in grade four when Mrs Lacey tied my left hand behind my back, forcing me to write with my right hand. What a tyrant. Scared stiff of her angry face, I battled to make a letter.

This time, my fear didn't last long. Mum headed straight to the school and informed them that I was left-handed and that was that. My hand was released.

Character building or just part of life as a kid?

Fortunately, there were also good teachers, such as dear Miss Alcott. A gentle soul, she was so kind to me when I got my first pair of glasses aged eight.

'It doesn't matter that you're the only person with glasses in the class because it makes you special,' she reassured me. A definite confidence boost, and just what I've continued to need throughout my life.

Around the same time, my enthusiastic and rotund gymnastics teacher, Myra, inspired me to excel at gymnastics. She had a kind heart, always encouraging and coaxing us girls to try out a variety of flexible antics. Flinging my legs in the air, cartwheeling across the room, and somersaulting over an ever-increasing number of folded bodies on the floor was my idea of fun in those days.

The highlight of my career as a gymnast was the Christmas performance where five of those torsos huddled together on the floor. With a running leap, I conquered the challenge, somersaulting onto the trusty mat. I puffed out my chest as I stepped off the stage, my eyes twinkling. A smile swept across my sweat-soaked cheeks. Mum and Dad just patted me on the shoulder. Back then, I didn't realise they didn't know how to express their feelings.

Life changed for me when my parents bought a house in Roseville to care for my grandparents who were well into their eighties.

In addition to a sprawling garden, our large home on the corner of Dudley Avenue and Gregory Street offered a myriad of bedrooms and hallways. It was a home I could lose myself in whilst Mum performed her usual tasks of cooking and cleaning and, all too often, chasing my grandfather up the road in his pyjamas. He loved to wander off. These days we'd call it dementia.

I can still remember his gentle smile and endearing manner when Mum returned with her escapee in tow after he'd snuck off to find the local bowling green. Sad now, as I think back on the frustration he felt as he grew old. We loved and cared for him until he finally let go of life with a bout of pneumonia.

My Grandmother was a grand old lady who had always been there for her family. In her twilight years, she chose to follow her Charlie soon after his demise. She no longer had the will to live, given their sixty years of life together had ended.

As I reflect on my childhood spent with my Grandparents, I loved my time with them.

Overnight stays in their Chatswood home, where Grandpa constantly weeded his extensive veggie patch, were one of the highlights in my tiny world. Grandma's chocolate blancmange and my cheating at Chinese chequers are precious memories.

I now appreciate the important role Grandparents play in a child's life. Their guidance and wisdom have such an enormous influence on their grandchildren's development. I strive to inspire my four grandchildren with my insight and prudence.

The move to Roseville meant starting a new school in year five. This proved to be a difficult transition for me. Yes, another challenge making friends.

I sometimes wonder whether my difficulty with friendships throughout the rest of my life was initiated by this move when I was ten years of age.

All in all, the restlessness and confusion of my early years – what I was looking for or what I was missing – still remains a mystery. One day, I'd be best friends with someone; the next week it would be someone different. At the time, I worried that these girls “didn't like me”.

Was this just part of surviving as a little girl?

I had nobody to talk to about these feelings as my sister Beth, eleven years older than me, was missing in action – too busy working and courting her new boyfriend. And Mum was always busy in the kitchen baking biscuits or chocolate cake, and perhaps, too naïve or preoccupied to perceive I might be struggling.

My “only child” syndrome pushed me to seek fun outside my home. As a kid, I loved to be busy, and the fairies at the bottom of our garden went some way toward filling the gap of my isolation at the weekends. They were my special friends, and my imagination ran wild as I chatted to them incessantly.

Chapter 3

Life on Board

As it turned out, my time on the *Ellinis* proved to be very different from my lonely trip on the *Himalaya*.

Kathy, Libby, and I slept by day and played by night. After all, what else was there to do as the ship steamed full-bore across the Pacific Ocean, stopping at one port after another.

The ship's daily bulletin *Seascape* had been slipped under our door while we were having breakfast. And while the trusty *Seascape*, didn't offer us much amusement, it did contain an invitation to the Captain's Cocktail Party. Excited, we grasped the opportunity.

Any remnants of the anxiety and hurt feelings I had felt when we left Sydney seemed to fade away entirely – replaced by excitement as I dressed for the occasion that evening. My birds-nest hairstyle took some manipulating and the aid of the faithful Gossamer hairspray to get every hair stuck in place. I plastered the foundation over my face, applying my bright blue eye shadow and thick mascara before slipping into my slinky white lace dress.

‘Are you ready? Let's hit the ballroom. Come on Kathy, hurry up, you're always last.’ Libby joked. Sliding into her shoes, she rushed up behind us as we scurried along the many passageways. We joined the long queue, grinning from ear to ear.

I rubbed my thumbs and fingers together in a state of nervous expectation. In a dither, I eyed off the handsome Greek officers lined up beside the captain. My turn. I shook their hands. My eyelids fluttered as I offered up some vague platitudes before moving into the vast room to collect a glass of bubbly. It didn't take long for one of them to sidle over to me.

‘I'm Panos. Like to dance?’ he asked in his alluring Greek accent. A man of solid build, not overly tall with piecing brown eyes, he smiled at me with an air of confidence as he followed me onto the polished timber dance floor. The lavish ballroom, decorated with maroon velvet furnishings, had large windows that overlooked the swirling ocean. The five-piece band

struck up a waltz. My heart fluttered. My palms sweaty, I swung around the room in his warm embrace. Engrossed in this new love affair with my handsome Greek engineer, my naivety led me down a path that could only end in disappointment.

But at the time, all I felt was exhilaration. We were off on our adventure. And each one of us had an officer on our arm.

Living on a Greek ship presented incredible highs and unexpected challenges. As for the highs, I recall being mesmerised by Tahiti's majestic islands, rising like rocky monoliths through the misty morning light. I sat on the beach sipping a cool coconut juice served in its shell. Shafts of sunlight reflected on the still waters, enshrouding me with a feeling of peace and tranquillity. I'd never experienced a place of such beauty. My mind drifted into a fantasy of visiting this romantic island with the man of my dreams. I'm still waiting.

The challenges came on arrival in Nauru harbour. The tide was too low for our grand old lady to dock, so we had to be transported to shore by boat. While waiting for this to happen, we passed the time in the dining room eating our bacon and eggs. One minute all was fine ... and the next, I slid backwards across the dining room almost toppling off my chair. *Whoops, what's going on?*

As I struggled to save myself, I noticed other guests were sliding around the room too. I battled to get to my feet, swaying like a drunk, as the ship continued to list. *Geez I'd better get out of here.* Groping my way back to our cabin, I gingerly hung onto the wall of the alleyway, trying to keep my balance. A cabin boy passed by.

‘What the hell is going on?’ I yelled.

‘Not sure. It's something to do with the water levels in the containers in the hold. That's all I can tell you.’

Just then, Libby came rushing into our cabin. ‘Quick, free drinks in the bar,’ she puffed. ‘See you up there.’ Well, at least that was something.

The bar was packed with passengers who struggled to stay upright as they balanced on their barstools. Gripped by fear that our ship might meet the same fate as the Titanic, the conversation was frantic.

‘How could these crazy Greeks cause all this drama by allowing the ballast of the ship to be affected like this?’ one fellow bellowed.

‘Watch the Greeks, if they jump overboard, we’ll jump too,’ someone else suggested.

Needless to say, we never made it to the mainland of Nauru. We spent the day waiting for the water vessels to be rebalanced, becoming more and more inebriated as each hour passed.

As we headed off to the Panama Canal with the sun falling below the horizon in a vivid flash of yellow and red hues, I decided to rest my swirling head on my bunk. It didn’t seem appropriate to arrive at the dinner table legless.

‘Let’s go onto the deck,’ Libby suggested early one morning. ‘I want to watch the ship make its way through the canal.’

‘Good idea, we’ll probably never pass this way again,’ I laughed.

We spent the rest of the day, lazing in our deck chairs as the captain manoeuvred our floating home through the twelve locks on the canal.

‘Wow, how clever is this? I had no idea how these locks work,’ I said to Libby, as we headed for the Atlantic Ocean. ‘They’re used like a lift to take us up to the mountains of Panama. Amazing.’

That evening, a stop in Panama City offered us another shore trip. I feel fortunate that I didn’t join my friends who went to a nightclub for a few hours. Pornography was not my cup

of tea. Although, I have to admit my eager ears did absorb some of the sordid details on their return.

This marked a rare occasion when my conservatism controlled my decision making. My fun-loving nature could easily have tempted me to follow the crowd.

Things had been very different in my teens.

I was quite innocent when I started at Roseville Public School. At the time, Archibald Road (known as the big dipper) would test my lung capacity every day as I made my way to and from my new school. My first weeks there were tricky, as many of the girls had started together at kindergarten and already had established friendships.

When I finally made a few friends, I was swept up in a whirl of conversations about the “birds and the bees”. I had no idea what they were on about, but I never let on how perplexed I was. Instead, I pretended I knew it all already, while soaking up every detail.

I think Mum had thrust a book or two into my hand. That was about as good as it got. So, most of my sex education at that time came from my newfound friends.

Despite feeling alone and desperate to fit in, I always exuded a sense of being in control, organising my friends to play after school or striving hard to win at Vigoro every lunchtime. But my facade of pseudo confidence never allowed me to reveal the “real me”. All in all, I enjoyed my last two years at primary school. I even ended up as vice-captain of the school – not sure how that happened.

At high school, though, I really ramped things up. I was not your model student and my attitude to schoolwork left a lot to be desired.

Mum had decided the local high school, Chatswood High, was too rough and “not suitable” for her daughter. And looking back now, I'm grateful for her decision to send me to Ravenswood Methodist College as it gave me a solid grounding for life. Unfortunately, I did

not take advantage of the unique opportunity that my private school education offered. The school wasn't the problem. I felt privileged to attend Ravenswood. I simply didn't like the institution.

I did love Mrs Garty's French lessons though. It was fun watching her try to balance on her rather worn-out stiletto heels while questioning her choice of tightly hugging dresses and skirts. She had escaped on a train from Hungary just after the war, and her stories fascinated me. Hence, I paid attention to her broad French, or perhaps it was Hungarian, accent as she put us through our paces of masculine and feminine nouns.

As for my other subjects, I put in as little effort as needed and slunk through my exams with very average marks. Did I care? NO. I was too busy having a good time, mucking up in class. Hitting the ball over the high wired fence on the tennis court, so I could disappear for a smoke during PE was my kind of fun.

Sport each week was my favourite period. As a keen participant in the Captain Ball and Tunnel Ball teams, I found a sense of belonging. I strived to be part of the group, so everyone would like me, whilst the little voice inside continued to undermine me, forever saying, 'You're not good enough.'

I remember making frequent visits to the Headmistress's office. Miss Evans, a plain Jane with nil personality, ran a very tight regime which produced some excellent scholastic results. One girl in our year ended up on the Board of the Reserve Bank.

'Miss Evans wants to see us in her office again,' Mum announced on my arrival home one afternoon.

'What for this time?' I bellowed. No answer. An angry scowl spread across Mother's face. I disappeared to my bedroom where I contemplated tomorrow's haranguing – again.

As I sat in the office with my mother listening to yet another trouncing down about my disruptive behaviour and lack of interest in the classroom, I felt completely detached and disinterested.

I realise now that my behaviour was all part of my need to be noticed and accepted. Needless to say, I ended up with the reprobates of my year, the “in crowd”. I never really fitted with their self opiniated attitudes, but I struggled on, determined to be part of the gang. Every weekend, we'd go through the same charade. It never ended.

‘Where are you going tonight?’ Mum would ask me.

‘Out.’

‘You can't wear that dress. You look cheap and nasty. Make sure that you're home by 12:30.’

I'd flounce out the door, jump in the car with a group of my friends and head off to join the masses at the local coffee shop in St Ives. Its name escapes me now. The shops straddled the main road – no large Westfield shopping centres in those days. The milling crowd spilled onto Mona Vale Road. Hundreds of teenagers with nothing to do on a Saturday night. That's how it was in those days. Probably still is. Lost individuals wondering how to entertain themselves.

Those in the know would hand out the address of some poor souls' party to all the mad capped teenagers. Cars revving, doing wheelies along the main road, everyone was off for a night of boozing.

When I look back now, they seem like perilous years. My poor mother was at her wit's end. She thought by trying to control me, she'd guide me onto the right path. She didn't stand a chance. I was out there, amongst it all.

How did I survive those turbulent years? How could I have lived my life differently?
Interesting questions to ponder.

And yet, the same lessons linger in my life. *Does it ever end?* My fractured thoughts and feelings continue to plague me, pushing me to always search for my truth, observing my reactions. Without this journey, I would not be who I am today. My life experiences have been my greatest teacher. I keep searching for the answers. *Hope I work it out before I depart this life.*

I remember telling my daughter, Nicole, during her turbulent teenage years, ‘Don't think you can get away with anything. Whatever you're doing, I've done it ten times worse.’

Well almost, I certainly never smoked dope or took any drugs, which in reality was a miracle. They just never came my way; thank goodness.

Chapter 4

England on The Horizon

During our voyage on *Ellinis*, we decided to invite Sue and Wendy, a couple of girls we'd met onboard, to share a flat with us when we reached London. Excitement buzzed in the air as we talked endlessly about what we'd do, and what we'd need when we arrived.

‘Let's each get our own set of cutlery,’ someone suggested.

Seemed like a good idea. So, I decided to get started right away. After a delicious smorgasbord lunch, I stuffed a knife, fork, and spoon down the front of my trousers. Brash and stupid, I wandered past the dining room steward who was standing in the doorway. You can imagine my horror as the fork hit the polished timber floor. Crash. Then the spoon met its fate, followed by the knife. One by one, they fell out of the bottom of my trouser leg. Leaving a trail of silverware behind me, I kept walking as though completely oblivious to what had occurred. All the while, my stomach was turning upside down with guilt. I didn't look back. That was my first and last foray into stolen goods. I bought my own set of cutlery on arrival in London.

As Bermuda beckoned, I realised that our time on board was ticking down. Very soon, we'd be docking at Southampton.

A fascinating tour took us to the home of a family who were born on the island. The heartfelt welcome to their humble abode remains a special memory. We ate and laughed together, as I shared my lifestyle back home with my eager audience.

I remember hiking up a steep hill to visit the loo. Just imagine the look of horror on my face, not to mention the stench, when I opened the door, and a “long drop” awaited me. I'd never seen anything like it. No, camping was never on our family agenda.

Finally, the time came to say our goodbyes and make our way back to our trusty home in the harbour.

Amsterdam and Bremerhaven were last on the list as the countdown to our arrival in the UK continued. The temperature had plummeted, but I'd had enough of being cooped up. So, I welcomed the opportunity to go shopping in Germany. An icy wind from the North Sea whipped around my legs as I scurried along the pathway to the first shoe shop I could find. A pair of knee-high boots were an essential purchase, even if I did manage to buy a size too big because I couldn't understand the salesgirl. Never mind, at least I was ready for the freezing conditions. Or so I thought.

Sad farewells ensued on arrival in Southampton, as we all prepared ourselves for the next chapter in our lives. We'd made some great friends but knew realistically we'd probably never see each other again. And as for our companions in their crisp white uniforms? What hope did we have of seeing them again?

We did not much care. We were about to embark on a new adventure with no clue of what lay ahead.

As we bid our faithful (or perhaps not so faithful) officers farewell at Southampton, leaving behind our floating home for the past six weeks, I pondered the new world awaiting me. *What kind of life was I about to experience? Was I ready for an unknown future in London?*

Chapter 5

Hello London Town

After disembarking, a short taxi ride took us to the station where we waited for the train to pull in. I recall struggling onto the train with all my worldly possessions and following my friends along the narrow passageway, until they found a cubicle big enough for all of us. I slumped into an old leather-upholstered seat. My chest dipped in a sigh of relief as we pulled out of Southampton, heading for Waterloo Station.

On our arrival, the myriad of bodies racing down the escalators to the various platforms sent my head into overload. We searched for the underground station to Earls Court, and with directions from a few locals, between the five of us, we managed to find our way to the Overseas Visitors Club. A favourite haunt in those days for many Aussie travellers, it offered us a safe haven to find our feet in this huge metropolis.

I can still feel the freezing damp penetrating every cell of my body as we tramped around the square in the pitch dark at eight o'clock each morning for brekkie. My head ached with the cold as though a vice was gripping my skull.

Welcome to London town.

We Sydney girls had never experienced anything like these temperatures, having sailed away into the blue yonder on a balmy summer's evening with the sun's rays reflecting in the still waters of Sydney's spectacular harbour.

It only took a few days for Kathy, Libby, and I, along with our newfound friends, Sue, a Lane Cove girl, and Wendy, a quiet, country girl from Orange, to find our new home in Willesden Green, north London.

With the snow pelting through a broken windowpane in one of the bedrooms, this flat was not for the faint-hearted. Yes, we'd arrived on the fifth of January, mid-winter in the Northern Hemisphere. Lining up our five mattresses each night in front of the gas heater, we

filled the metre with coins to ensure our survival until morning. Giggling and joking, we'd reminisce about our creature comforts back home before dropping off to sleep.

‘What the hell are we doing here in these archaic conditions?’ Sue exclaimed one night, shivering in front of the tiny heater.

‘Let's get out of here,’ I said. ‘There's got to be a better place waiting for us somewhere in this city.’

‘Want to escape to France for a week before we have to move?’ Sue asked.

‘Why not?’

Two days later, we were back in Southampton again, boarding the ferry to cross the English Channel to Calais – no tunnel to France in 1969.

Tired and bleary-eyed after sitting up all night, we disembarked, ill-prepared for what lay ahead. I stood with Sue on the edge of the road shivering in my boots, my thumb pointing towards Paris. My first hitchhiking experience. Little did I know, it wouldn't be my last.

Our innate desire to spend as little money as possible steered our decision making, much of which was questionable – especially our mode of transport (hitchhiking) and choice of staying in youth hostels in the middle of winter.

When we finally made it to Paris, I was blown away by the “City of Light”. I wandered around starry-eyed and gobsmacked by the history and beauty of Paris.

The light shining from behind the magnificent, thirteenth-century stained-glass windows of Notre Dame Cathedral exuded a kaleidoscope of colour that I'll never forget. I feel grateful I got to spend time enjoying the magnificence of this iconic building, given the disastrous damage caused by the fire in April 2019. By the time it was extinguished, the building's spire had collapsed, most of its roof had been destroyed, and its upper walls were severely damaged. Thank goodness, many works of art and religious relics were moved to

safety early in the emergency, but others suffered smoke damage with some of the exterior art damaged or destroyed.

Our tourist trek took us to one famous monument after another: Arc de Triomphe, Eiffel Tower, Champs Elysees, Sacre-Coeur, and Montmartre with the famous Moulin Rouge. Too poor to visit the latter, I could only stand outside imagining the lavish performances each night. Little did I know then, I would be lucky enough to enjoy this flamboyant cabaret many years later.

One late afternoon, while resting on a park bench in the Bois de Boulogne, we noticed some elderly gentlemen throwing what appeared to be heavy silver balls along the dirt patch to each other.

‘What on earth are they playing?’

‘I’ve no idea, but it looks pretty serious.’ Sue laughed.

Fifty years later, I find myself watching the same game, Petanque in French, although better known as Bocce, at the kids' camps I organise. Just like the Parisian gentlemen, they love it too.

‘Let’s catch the train to Versailles,’ Sue suggested after we’d run out of puff wandering around Paris. Full of enthusiasm, I agreed, having only heard about this famous monument since arriving in Paris.

Once there, we followed the crowds, winding our way along the road towards the palace. As we turned the corner, I felt like my feet were cemented to the pavement. I stared in awe at the majestic royal building. Walking through the Gate of Honour, a rush of blood gushed through my body. My head buzzing, I again stood motionless for a few minutes, trying to comprehend the size and magnificence of the palace.

‘Come on, Jan,’ said Sue. ‘Let’s get our tickets, before all these people start queuing.’

‘Okay, got them. Let’s go. The entrance is over there.’

As we stood mesmerised by the extravagant chandeliers, intricate painted ceiling, and incredible reflections of the Hall of Mirrors, we were taken by surprise when a couple of good-looking French boys sidled up to us.

‘Hello, where are you from?’ the more charming one asked, his accent evident.

‘Australia,’ said Sue as she moved away, her eyes glued to the beautiful furniture adorning the room.

Before we knew it, they had offered to show us around. After wandering through the multitude of richly decorated rooms with lavish brocade settees, antique desks, and elaborate Louis XIV gilded clocks, we found ourselves sitting beside the stunning Summer Fountain on the famous Royal Way. Captivated by the endless spray of water dancing from the mouths of the fragile figures in the late afternoon sun, I struggled to control my emotions. I fell under the spell of my charming companion. The rest is history, other than to say we spent the night in their university dorm.

The following morning, realising the error of our ways, we made a hasty retreat, hopping back on the train to Paris.

Le Mont-Saint-Michel in Normandy was next on the tourist list. Getting there proved to be quite a mission. After making numerous inquiries of passers-by in our schoolgirl French, we found our way to Paris Montparnasse station. There, we jumped on the train to Rennes. Then hopped on another train to Pontorson, and finally, we took a shuttle bus to our destination.

As we approached the Mont, a bit worse for wear, we stood for a moment on the causeway to capture its imposing grandeur. Goosebumps tickled my arms. *I've only ever dreamt about visiting this famous site, now I'm actually here.* I made my way to the entrance in silence, drinking in my surroundings, before embarking on our tour.

‘Can you imagine surviving in jail on this isolated rocky outcrop? That Louis XI must have been a mongrel,’ I whispered to Sue as the tour guide prattled on without taking breath.

‘Yeah ... they must have been a tough breed. I shudder at the thought of surviving one night in this dismal place. How on earth did they do it?’

Still, the tour guide's voice droned on, her thick French accent barely decipherable to our ears. So, we wandered off to explore the island's countless hidden nooks and crannies.

Standing in silence for a few moments, a sense of reverence consumed me. ‘I love this room. Imagine the monks, adorned in their heavy woollen robes, being called to prayer each evening in this austere abbey.’

Sue nodded her head. ‘Better leave before night falls,’ she said.

‘Yep, good idea. Let's go.’ We scurried along the tiny alleys and down the hundreds of steep narrow steps back to the entrance of the Mont as the sun sank deeper into the horizon.

‘Whew, we've just made it in time before the tide turns.’

‘No wonder this place is a UNESCO World Heritage Site, all those dark stories and its stark beauty,’ I said as we stood on the roadside, Sue pointing her thumb in the direction of who knows where.

Within minutes, an elderly couple in a Citroen pulled up and an elegant lady with a grey bun and classic twinset and tweed skirt wound down the window.

‘Où allez-vous?’

‘L'hostel de youth,’ I replied in my best French, which left a lot to be desired. Somehow, she got the gist, so we hopped into the backseat and disappeared into the distance. Hitchhiking was still our preferred mode of transport.

One youth hostel in particular leaps out at me as I reflect on this trip. After a day's hitchhiking in the heart of Normandy, we studied our trusty YHA book and ended up in a tiny village called Evreux. A feeling of neglect emanated from the dilapidated old farmhouse, which was the youth hostel. Not a soul in sight, we approached our abode for the night, opened the creaky door and crept inside.

‘Gosh, what a dump.’

‘We’ve got no choice, let’s make the best of it,’ said Sue. ‘It’s getting dark and cold outside, and we’ve got no idea where we are.’ We chuckled, venturing on like two warriors determined to overcome our misfortune.

Dust and grime contaminated every bench top in the kitchen – in fact, everything we touched. We scrubbed the pots and pans before preparing something to eat and devouring our modest fare. Then it was time for bed. Huddled together to keep warm, I could hear the sound of scurrying feet all around me. It felt like an invasion. My phobia of mice and rats reached a crescendo as I lay motionless in my sleeping bag, willing the first light to shine forth so our predators would vanish to their hidey holes.

As soon as we rose, I said, ‘Last night was enough for me. Let’s get back to London.’

‘Yep, I’ve had enough too,’ said Sue.

That afternoon, we were back on the train and homeward bound for Willesden Green where the girls had been searching for our new home. It had been a short trip to France – a rush of blood to the head perhaps – but it marked my first “European trip”.

Chapter 6

Time for Work

The night Sue and I returned home, exhausted from our adventure, we sensed there was change afoot.

‘Let's have a round-table conference,’ Libby suggested.

Soon after, we were all engrossed in the search for a new flat. Bamboozled by the size of London, Libby spread out a map. Google Maps was not even dreamt of then, and it took hours of poring over it before she announced, ‘Okay, I've got it. Let's look for a place close to the West End where we all work.’

The following morning, we scanned the newspaper. A mansion, not quite in its former glory, but situated in an affluent suburb of north London, beckoned us.

The owner showed us around the place, which spread over three floors. We wandered from room to room admiring the space. *What a huge place.*

So close to central London, it fitted the bill with two large bedrooms on separate floors, a reasonably modern kitchen, and lounge/dining room area big enough to accommodate the five of us. The bathroom was down a few stairs and would be shared with our landlords. It was a bit cramped and damp, but so what? We were young and adaptable.

Plus, it was right on the border of the fabulous Regent's Park.

‘Well, a Regent's Park address sounds far more salubrious than the postal address of Camden Town – where the Irish strive to make ends meet at the markets.’ Wendy whispered to me, as we wandered around.

‘What a pity that our landlords live in the basement, they'll never be far away.’

‘What do you reckon,’ Kathy asked us, as we huddled together on the footpath outside what was to be our new London pad.

‘Let's go for it,’ I said, ‘It's a great place. We'll cope with the landlords. They seem really nice people.’ Everyone was happy with our lucky find, so we agreed to sign the lease. The following week, we said goodbye to Willesden Green and moved our meagre belongings into our new abode.

Kathy and I had been good friends since our teens. I had been so excited the night she rang to invite me on this adventure to the other side of the world. She was a realist whereas, throughout my twenty-one-plus years, my whacky character had allowed me the freedom to shoot from the hip. So, I guess one could say that we complimented each other. Despite our differences, her friendship was important to me.

As teenagers, we had spent many weekends on Palm Beach with the boys from the Surf Club – when they didn't have a party to crash that is. It was great fun. Hanging out on the beach with your boyfriend offered a night's canoodling and plenty of vodka and orange mixers. They were my favourite. A lethal mix if I consumed too many, which I sometimes did.

Sadly, some boys never made it home from those parties – breathalysers didn't exist in those days. In their parents' cars, sometimes with their girlfriends aboard, they'd slide off the road on a tight bend and end up in the bush confronting a gumtree. The rest was history, other than the rumblings the following week at St Ives.

‘Did you hear about Geoff? Blind drunk again. Wrapped himself around a telegraph pole on Mona Vale Road. Didn't stand a chance. Idiot.’

‘Was he alone?’

‘No idea. Didn't hear anyone was with him. How many times did he tempt fate? Now he's dead.’ Incessant callous chatter, this time Geoff; last time Pete. I'm sad to say, looking back at those treacherous years, that, on some level, we took it as normal.

I often stayed overnight in Kathy's Killara mansion, though dealing with her overbearing father was always challenging for me, despite Kathy's best efforts to keep the peace.

Later, the Newport Arms Hotel became our hang out spot when we had nowhere else to go. You had to have reached the ripe old age of eighteen to get past Tim the bouncer. He was a force to be reckoned with.

Having baked our bodies in the sun all day and burnt red like lobsters after splashing ourselves with coconut oil to ensure the best tan, we'd congregate at the pub. Situated beside the dazzling waters of Pittwater in the beach side suburb of Newport, we'd fritter the hours away with idle chat before heading home. How we made those twenty-five kilometres to Gordon alive still remains a mystery. We must have thought we were invincible. Or someone was on our side.

Another favourite hang-out during my teenage years was the local cinema in Gordon where surfing films were screened.

Quite the ball of style in the early 60s. I'd turn up in my stomping shoes (sneakers), wearing my black and white hound's tooth shift over my black jumper –which I had to change from the red one I'd left home in because Mum would not allow me to wear black.

They'd play “Bombora”, “Surfer Girl”, and other favourites by Little Pattie, and we'd all go off our brains. Much like when the Beatles used to sing their oldie-but-goldies, and teenagers around the world would go ballistic. Thank goodness, it was simple amusement, not like the huge music festivals these days.

Along with the signing of the lease for our “Regent's Park” digs came a reality check that prompted me to find work – real fast. Dressed in a tweed winter coat and a mini skirt that

barely covered my backside, and with my shiny leather boots to keep the chill off my legs, I hit the trail.

Back in 1963, when I was in year ten, career choices for women were limited. Nursing, teaching and stenography were among the few “suitable” vocations available to the female sex.

So, it should've come as no surprise when, one evening over a dinner of steak and kidney pie, my mother announced, ‘I've booked you into Metropolitan Business College for a year.’ Without missing a beat, she added, ‘No point wasting any more money on your education, I've had quite enough of your misdemeanours at school.’

I did not utter a single word in response as I picked out the kidney, studying each piece intently. I detested steak and kidney pie. I wasn't into eating animal organs.

‘Did you hear me? You'll start in January, while all your friends study for their Leaving Certificates.’ In those days, you did five years of high school, wrote your final exams, and then graduated to university. *Great, I'll be stepping out into the world a year ahead of them.*

‘Okay,’ I murmured.

In the January of 1964, I commenced a journey that would continue for many years – catching the 8 am local train to Wynyard station each day.

At the end of the year, my shorthand and typing skills landed me my first job in the typing pool with a stock and station agent called Pitt Son and Badgery. It was a mean-spirited place. I loathed working there. Mr Whatever-his-name used to stomp around the room making sure we were all tapping away on the antiquated typewriters and handing out the never-ending letters. Mundane and repetitive, my discontent showed me to the door three months later. I had decided to search for a happier future as a stenographer.

Mr Lord, who sat on many Company Boards, including the now defunct Ansett Airlines, came to my rescue. A wealthy, well-established man with a kind heart, approaching

his seventies, he introduced me to Inga on my first day. Her flat Germanic features mirrored her attitude to life, a lonely soul with nothing but her job to keep her happy. An aura of sadness wrapped around her couture-dressed body. In the twelve months I worked there, she was a closed book, never mentioned a friend; her outside life a mystery. *Perhaps she wasn't about to reveal herself to the innocent 17-year-old typist?*

Mr Lord was her hero. She did everything to assure her security in his commercial world. They'd go out for lunch together to discuss the company's direction whilst I munched on my sandwich at my desk. The highlight of my lunch hour was wandering around the boring streets of Sydney each day, before returning to the austere old building on the corner of King and Kent streets for another afternoon of making the tea and tapping the keys, intent on not making any mistakes. I still remember the rattly old lift clanking its way to the fifth floor, and wondering each day whether I'd make it to the office.

That era was a far cry from my super saleswoman career years later.

On that icy day in London in 1969, I scurried from one West End employment agency to the next. There were no jobs advertised online in those days. Fortunately, the foot slogging didn't take long. I landed a job at a hoity-toity company in Gower Street, close to the junction of Tottenham Court Road and Oxford Street, and an easy bus ride from Camden Town (or was it Regent's Park?).

My training and experience as a secretary (a fancy title for shorthand and typing) with various companies in Sydney meant that I ticked all the boxes. Or perhaps my enthusiasm and determination at the interview clenched the deal?

Either way, the job was perfect.

A few weeks into my new role, I moulded into the English mindset and started to enjoy my job. My mentor was the prim and proper Mrs. Dougherty, and, though I worked in this

small firm for over a year, until I took off for my next “European trip”, I can't even remember what the company did – only Mrs Dougherty's kind face. Oh ... and the lunchtimes spent wandering along Oxford Street and window shopping at the major stores like Selfridges and Peter Jones, which became my favourite pass time.

The company gave me luncheon vouchers to buy a cheap lunch each day. Scotch eggs, a real delicacy for the Brits, became one of my favourites. I cringe now as I think about all the calories within those eggs wrapped in deep-fried breadcrumbs. My alternative was egg and anchovy sandwiches. Perhaps a healthier option, even if they were made on processed white bread.

Purchasing my veggies for the week at the Berwick Street Markets was another novelty markets didn't exist in Sydney in those days. The atmosphere with vendors spruiking their wares at the top of their lungs became part of my weekly ritual. It never entered my head that I had to trudge home with a bag so heavy I could hardly carry it. I couldn't resist the bargains – and still can't.

Chapter 7

Party Time

‘We don't know a soul,’ Kathy announced one evening. She'd been down-in-the-mouth during dinner. ‘Want to throw a house-warming party?’

Silence crept around the table, all four of us lost for words.

I stepped in to relieve the tension with complete disregard for anyone else's opinion. ‘You just said, “We don't know anyone in London”. That would make throwing a party a crazy idea, don't you think?’

‘Well, there's Paul.’ Libby offered, grinning from ear to ear. ‘I met him at my temp job. I'll ask him to bring his mates.’ A free spirit, she loved the idea of getting involved with the London scene. In fact, thanks to her, we'd spent many an evening scoffing down a pint or two at the neighbourhood pubs, hellbent on assimilating into the local culture.

Decision made. The fire in my belly burned with exuberance and excitement. Little did I know that this party was about to catapult me into a new direction – very different from my well-made plans.

Excited about upgrading my outdated Aussie wardrobe for the party with a mini-skirt and knee-high boots, I tramped up Oxford Street the following weekend with my flat mates. Shopping was not my forte, so I lagged behind, while the girls flitted from one rack to the next at Selfridges. I had no idea what to buy until an eager young shop assistant came to my rescue. I ended up with my first pair of black bell-bottom trousers and a long slinky top in varying shades of green and gold. She insisted on adding a gold chain belt to complete my new look. No boots this time, but WOW did I feel trendy.

Next up, we took a wander along Carnaby Street, one of the coolest destinations in the London's swinging 60s scene. Fashion boutiques straddled the pedestrian walkway on Oxford

Street. Designers like Mary Quant and Marion Foale, Lord John, Take Six, and Irvine Sellars all had their premises on this famous thoroughfare. The Who or the Rolling Stones would often appear at the legendary Marquee Club.

The street positively vibrated with an amazing array of colours. It was in full swing with mod and hippie styles everywhere. My eyes almost popped out of their sockets as I surveyed the passing parade of trend setters. The blokes wore floral trousers with bright yellow, red or pink ruffled shirts. Paisley ties were all the rage, not to mention the long mops of hair that concealed their faces in true Beatles style. The girls – all striving to look like Twiggy with long hair dangling down their backs, white boots and scanty miniskirts – blew me away.

Word about our party had spread, and the English partygoers appeared out of the cracks the following Saturday night. We were all raging to our favourite Beatles' hits: “Yellow Submarine”, “Twist and Shout”, and “All You Need is Love”, when I noticed an Englishman eyeing me off from the other side of the room. Before I knew it, I was dancing and chatting the night away with Brian. He was good-looking and a true cockney – he'd been born within the sound of Bow Bells. I was in heaven.

The epitome of a trendy man-about-town, Brian wore a mauve striped shirt, sleeves rolled to just below his elbows, slinky grey trousers, and brown slip-on shoes. His charm enveloped me. He left an indelible mark upon me that night. It was love at first sight for me. The beginning of a new love affair that would span seven years.

Every night after our date, we would sit in his minivan outside my new home, chatting for hours about my life in Australia, and the challenges of his life growing up with his mother – his father having passed away when he was fifteen. He seemed focused on making a success of his life despite his meagre upbringing in various council flats around London. Our lives were poles apart, yet a strong attraction bound us together.

Like most twenty-one-year-olds, I thought I knew it all. After all, I was living and working in the centre of London and proud of my achievements. I had little regard for my parents' advice when offered. I was lucky – during our three-minute telephone conversations, there was little opportunity for recrimination. It was all about the weather, my work, and if time permitted, what I was doing. Calling across the world was not as easy as it is these days when one can sit and chat for hours to friends or family on WhatsApp. So, Mum never knew about the party until I rang one evening months later. In fear and trepidation, I announced that I'd met a new man. You can imagine the all too familiar stony silence.

Out of the blue one night, the girls announced they were vacating the flat and taking off in a van to tour Europe together in two weeks' time.

After they dropped that bombshell, an eerie silence descended over the dinner table. Sue jumped up to clear the dishes. Libby and Kathy followed her to the sink. I sat stuck to my chair, speechless and beating back the tears that were welling in my eyes.

How could Kathy, one of my closest friends, even consider taking off without me. She'd only met Sue and Wendy on board the ship. Were they more important?

Was it jealousy that I had a new boyfriend? Who knows? All I know is my flatmates hatched their plans while I was out and about with Brian.

I contemplated Kathy's selfish attitude – she was an only child, after all. But, in many ways I was an only child too, since my sister was eleven years older than me. The difference was that I spent my life compromising my needs to make sure everyone else was happy.

Each night, I wept in bed, trying to hide my feelings, as I didn't want to give those traitors in the bedroom upstairs the satisfaction of knowing that their decision had affected me. Wendy, my roommate, understood my suffering, and we'd talk about my dilemma into the wee hours. She realised how tough it was for me that she'd been invited, and I'd been left behind.

What my flatmates had done only reinforced my sense of loneliness. I felt abandoned with nobody beside me to fulfil my travel dreams.

Kathy's decision to leave without me cut deep, fanning the flames of rejection that had been kindled during my childhood, causing them to burn out of control.

All the pain and anguish of my constant struggle to make lasting friendships. The insecurity and doubt I felt, wondering whether this or that girl liked me or not. The constant worry that I wasn't good enough. It all came flooding back.

When I cast my mind back to my early childhood and my friendships with Kathleen, Suzanne and Sari, it brought on pangs of nostalgia so great they were almost unbearable.

The memories clashed in my head like cymbals in an orchestral masterpiece as I recalled how my school years had been tainted by my incessant search for approval.

Thinking back on my struggle to make lasting connections with my peers and the constant wandering from one school friend to the next, always on the outside looking in, left me heartbroken. I remembered how, even in my senior years at Ravenswood, I had followed the same pattern, roaming from one group of friends to another – always trying to fit in, but never quite succeeding. Kathy's desertion only served to prove that lasting friendships still continued to evade me.

The dreaded feeling of abandonment had reared its ugly head yet again. I was left gutted ... and homeless.

Chapter 8

Miracles Do Happen

When Brian heard my friends were deserting me, he came up with an idea.

‘Why don't you move in with me in Cornwall Gardens, temporarily?’

I jumped at the chance. I was in love. *What a great opportunity to discover a new life with my new partner.* I had somewhere to rest my head and laying it beside my new boyfriend was a real bonus. Although, I wasn't really sure how enthusiastic he was. *Did he feel obliged? I'll never know.*

‘Are you sure you want me there all the time?’

‘Yep, it will give us a chance to see how we go as a couple.’

In retrospect, a room in a shared flat with unknown flatmates would have been a better option. As romantic as it had seemed at first, sharing Brian's bedroom left me with nowhere to escape to when I needed time to myself. This really cramped my style.

I also couldn't quite shake the uneasy feeling that his flatmates might not want me there. Super sensitive, I tiptoed around them, taking every step with care and trepidation. Cooking dinner for us became an ordeal. *Was it okay to be in the kitchen or did someone else want to use the stove? When was the right time to shower or have breakfast?*

My desperation coloured my rational thinking. *How long can I live like this?*

After a couple of months, my answer came. Just when I was coming to grips with the idea that I'd never get the opportunity to explore Europe, I bumped into Bev, an old school friend. We had never been close friends as we were very different people. All I knew about her was that her father was a wealthy businessman who owned a chain of supermarkets in Sydney. Our differences hardly mattered now, given that we were miles away from home.

Bev exuded humility and compassion, listening intently to my tale of woe as I poured my heart out in the middle of Piccadilly. With a grin from ear to ear, she said, ‘Why don't we go together? I'm looking for a travel mate.’

‘What? Are you serious? I'd love to.’ I felt uneasy when I contemplated telling Mrs. Dougherty that I was leaving, but the time had come to fulfil my dream. My itchy feet told me it was time to take off.

Together we hatched our plans, hitchhiking was to be our preferred mode of transport, given our money was tight. At the time, the Aussie dollar was strong compared to its current exchange rate. It's all relative though, and we were both skint.

My faithful lover, Brian, seemed to accept my decision to take off. In fact, he encouraged me to fulfil my wish to discover Europe. Although, I'm not sure how he really felt, as he wasn't one to show his feelings. *Maybe it gave him time to reconsider this whirlwind romance?*

So, in the late Spring of 1969, I boarded the ferry to Calais again – this time with Bev. We decided to go wherever our fancy led us. This vague itinerary meant we began our travels in Paris as I knew the ropes. Acting as our tour guide, I escorted Bev around all the wonderful sites, in awe again of the splendour of this exciting city. With no mobile phones to guide us or to snap photos of each icon, we relied on my trusty map and thirty-five-millimetre camera. No posting photos to social media either, my family and friends would have to wait till I returned with my memories. Then Dad would load my holiday pics into the projector for one of his legendary slide evenings.

Details of the trip are a bit sketchy now, but suffice to say we managed to get ourselves into some sticky situations along the way. These seem funny now, but they were pretty scary

at the time. There we were – just two innocent Aussie girls – jumping into cars with unknown drivers, mostly of the opposite sex.

Standing on the side of the road just outside Paris, my thumb pointing southwards for what seemed like an eternity, a middle-class gentleman in his swish Citroen veered to the side of the highway. Jumping into the front seat, I immediately launched into my schoolgirl French. Between his sign language and my pathetic command of the language, I managed to glean that he was heading exactly where we wanted to go – the south of France. *Or was he?* It promised to be a long trip with little communication. The odd smile and a few basic descriptions of the countryside was all I could manage.

Some hours later, much to my horror, I felt a hand on my leg. My body stiffened as I mustered the courage to place it back onto the steering wheel. Our eyes never met. I hoped my message was clear.

Since his English appeared non-existent, Bev and I were able to plot our escape without him understanding a word. I asked him to stop in Nimes, telling him we wanted to visit the Roman ruins. When he stopped the car, we grabbed our luggage from the boot and headed off at a rapid pace. Giggling like a couple of schoolgirls, we knew our close shave could have been very different.

Among the vivid memories of our tour of Spain, I recall our visit to the wonderful Prado Museum in Madrid, and the narrow, winding streets of Toledo where I purchased a small donkey made from string. I cherished that memento for many years, until old age necessitated his burial.

The popular Costa Brava coastline offered us some essential respite. Life was easy with Bev. We chilled out in a pretty seaside village before negotiating the Pyrenees and heading towards the French Riviera.

‘Let's catch the train this time,’ my wise travel mate suggested.

‘Okay, can we jump off at Monte Carlo though? We can't miss that haven of the rich and famous.’

‘Yep, sounds good to me.’ Hours later, we found ourselves standing on the edge of the sidewalk, my eyes darting from one luxurious boat to the next, all squashed together in the small harbour. The scene oozed opulence and decadence with the owners sipping champagne on the decks of their sumptuous yachts. It made me feel like a nobody in a rich person's world.

‘Come on, we can't miss the casino,’ Bev said. ‘This is obscene.’

Monte Carlo hangs off the side of a cliff, so we left our bags at the railway station before struggling up to the casino. Huffing and puffing, we finally arrived at the front door of the regal-looking building.

‘This must be it,’ I panted, as ripples of excitement ran through my veins. ‘Princess Grace. Monte Carlo. I can't believe I'm actually here, Bev.’

Awestruck, I stood in the centre of one of the grandest rooms I'd ever seen. Shimmering chandeliers illuminated the gambling tables, gold decorations adorned the heavily flocked walls, and the shiny marble floor reflected the elegance of our surroundings. I felt like I'd just stepped into a make-believe world. Scantly dressed croupiers shuffled the cards with oversized men perched on the edge of their stools, large cigars dangling from the corner of their mouths, intense and ready to pounce.

As Bev's eyes darted from the Blackjack tables to the Roulette, she heaved a huge sigh. ‘Had enough?’

‘Yeah, this is a crazy world. Let's get back to the station.’

Nice and then Cannes with its supposedly rich lifestyle felt like poor relations after our stopover in Monte Carlo. Seeing the French in their deck chairs, basking in the sun, all cramped together on the stony beaches, I decided that wasn't my idea of fun.

‘Not quite like our golden sands stretching for miles,’ I laughed. ‘Gosh Bev, how lucky are we in Australia? Fancy having to walk over these hard pebbles to the murky water of the Mediterranean for a swim. Let's get back on that train.’

Next stop Italy. We arrived at Pisa station in the early hours of the morning with nowhere to sleep other than the station benches.

We were awakened by the swish of hoses washing down the platform and shooed away like a couple of homeless itinerants. Feeling most indignant, we scrambled for our belongings and quickly vanished. We both burst out laughing. *What would our parents think if they could see these two Ravenswood girls now?*

After killing a couple of hours with a morning coffee and then brekkie at a tiny cafe nearby, we set off to ascend the 251 steps of the leaning Tower of Pisa – one of Italy's most iconic tourist attractions. Needless to say, we were the first through the turnstile at the medieval tower. In seventh heaven, I revelled in the history of this wonderful monument. I couldn't believe I was climbing those stairs. When we reached the top, we stood for a while overlooking the town of Pisa to catch our breath.

‘Want to go to Austria?’ I asked Bev, as we pondered our next stop.

‘Why not? Let's do it on the train again. After that, we must come back to Italy, though. Venice is a must.’

Arriving in Klagenfurt on the Austrian border after a long train journey, the villagers' hospitality made us feel incredibly welcome. We had arrived in this tiny village late in the afternoon. The aroma of the simmering sauerkraut and sizzling bratwurst sausages on the outdoor cookers lured us into a new culinary experience, devouring more than our fair share.

The locals encouraged us with sign language, and laughing together, we tried to follow their folk dancing routines to the oompah music of the Lederhosen-clad piano accordion musician. We had no idea what the village was celebrating. *Did it matter? We were having a ball.*

Next day, it was time to head for Florence through the Dolomites. A couple of young, good-looking Italians stopped and offered us a lift. We jumped into the back seat and headed higher into the mountains with their rugged snow caps. Quaint villages dotted the verdant valleys far below. Although a spectacular sight, an uncomfortable feeling churned in the pit of my tummy.

‘I think we're being taken deeper into the mountains,’ I whispered to Bev.

‘Gosh, how are we going to get out of this one?’ she replied with a worried look on her face.

We managed to convince our charming companions to stop the car, and we jumped out. Fortunately, we'd been hanging onto our backpacks, keeping them on our laps. The lads drove off, their raucous laughter ringing in my ears. Far from amused, I felt scared that we'd be sleeping the night in our chilly mountain surroundings.

Stunned, we stood by the side of the winding road. We were in the middle of nowhere. The silence of the thick forest a frightening reminder of our isolation. Not a soul in sight, we consoled each other with an optimistic belief that someone would come along this lonely road and rescue us – and they did.

Venice was next on our list, and it brought joy and laughter back into our lives. Miraculously, we'd managed to get ourselves by train to this captivating city and, after finding the youth hostel, we dumped our belongings on our beds and headed off.

Walking through the never-ending pathways across the countless canals, I felt like I'd stepped into a different world. The city oozed mystique. Glamorous Italian mothers led their little ones home after a day at school. Older women dressed in black thrashed their rugs over the balcony – dust flying our way. Old grey-haired men sat on the Piazza San Marco, sucking on the end of roll-your-own cigs, as we wandered towards the Grand Canal.

In 1969, Venice, with its dignity intact, shone like a jewel. No planks to walk on in those days, given the waters hadn't risen to the levels they have sadly reached today. And no large cruise liners gliding up the canal to create more havoc. It was one of Italy's most fascinating cities back then, and it still is – even if it is overrun by millions of tourists.

As I look back now, I realise how privileged I was to have the opportunity to see the highlights of Venice, including the Doge's Palace (Palazzo Ducale), built in Venetian Gothic style. This magnificent building was the residence of the Doge of Venice – the supreme authority of the former Republic. Built in 1340, it has been extended and modified over the centuries. How it's survived now with the rising water is beyond belief. I guess the powers that be have a master plan to ensure its longevity.

The other spectacular landmark on the Piazza was the Basilica of San Marco, commonly known as St. Mark's Basilica. This famous Catholic Cathedral is joined to the Doges Palace. I wondered whether this was for convenience, or perhaps something more sinister? Well, certainly the Bridge of Sighs, which connects the New Prison to the interrogation rooms in the Doge's Palace must have some history.

And I mustn't forget, the elegant Rialto Bridge, the oldest of the four bridges spanning the Grand Canal.

A visit to Murano Glass completed our brief sojourn in Venice. There I purchased a souvenir glass bottle with a stopper that still stands proudly beside its Scandinavian friend on my loungeroom shelves.

We reached Florence successfully, by train. This being our new preferred mode of transport. And, on arrival, we settled into the usual salubrious (not) accommodation of one of the city's youth hostels. Early the following morning, we set out to discover one of Italy's finest cities, starting with the Uffizi Gallery, the spectacular cathedral with its richly decorated dome, and Ponte Vecchio. Shopping wasn't the best option, given our heavy bags and lack of funds, but I couldn't resist the array of trendy leather handbags in a wide selection of colours. After all, Florence was famous for its leather jackets and bags, and the tan designer model I splashed out on gave me years and years of pleasure.

Next, Rome beckoned us, so we decided on the safer travel option again. Well, almost safer, if you didn't count the lecherous old man who tried to chat us up. Bad luck mate, we're experienced now, no chance.

My first impressions of this incredible city overwhelmed me. As we tramped from the Forum to the Palatine Hill, and down the road to the Colosseum with all its horrendous stories, I revelled in the history of the ancient city. So hard to comprehend how Julius Caesar was assassinated in forty-four BC in the very place we were standing. And Marc Antony's funeral oration for Caesar (immortalised in Shakespeare's famous play) was delivered from the partially completed speaker's platform known as the New Rostra. Standing opposite this landmark in the Forum in 1969, we tried to imagine the mayhem of that time with the public burning of Caesar's body.

Our visit to St Peter's Basilica the following day did not end up quite how I'd expected. As we entered the church, one of the guards pointed to my mini skirt, which apparently wasn't an acceptable length to enter such a holy place of worship. Banished and disappointed, I felt like a criminal as I slunk back down the steps.

Determined not to miss this iconic attraction, I returned the following day with a crowd from the hostel jostling me into the church, still wearing the same dress – the only one I had. This time, I shuffled past the same guards with a jacket pulled around my legs. We joined the throng of fellow tourists lining the main aisle.

After pushing my way through to get a front-line position (I've always been good at that), I stood waiting with the crowd. For what? The young nuns beside us, ecstatic, giggling and chatting to us in their broken English explained we were about to witness a rare historical canonisation.

I took a deep breath as the Swiss Guards solemnly paraded past, holding the canopy at shoulder height, with Pope Paul VI just a couple of metres from us. A wash of excitement poured over me. What an extraordinary experience to be in St Peters Basilica for such a rare event. Even luckier my skirt had been too short the previous day.

With Italy ticked off the list, we headed to Lucerne and onto Bern. Although we loved the scenery in Switzerland, our mode of transport became increasingly tedious and our desire to keep travelling waned. After five weeks on the road, the hard slog had devoured our enthusiasm.

‘Feel like heading home?’ I asked Bev one night as we lay on our lumpy mattresses in our umpteenth youth hostel. ‘While I've loved our time together, and all the amazing places and experiences we've enjoyed, I'm exhausted now, and we're a long way from London.’

‘Yep, I've had enough too.’

After standing on the side of the road for only a few minutes, another Citroen pulled over. A handsome rotund Swiss wound down the window. His stark blue eyes dazzled me, not to mention his cute English accent. The all too familiar sensation churned in my tummy.

What the hell do we do? Flashes of anxiety bundled together with the excitement of returning to my new boyfriend whirled in my mind like a twister. In perfect English, he asked, ‘Where are you girls going?’

‘Calais,’ I mumbled, knowing it was hundreds of kilometres from Bern.

‘So am I,’ he said with a broad smile spreading across his rosy cheeks. ‘Jump in.’

With the throttle pulled out, and his foot firmly planted on the accelerator, we sped towards home. A sense of relief swirled in my head as we finally stepped onto the ferry, safe after a long and fast drive through France. I don't even remember a food stop. We'd found a gentleman for the final leg of our journey. Miracles do happen.

Chapter 9

Life Together

Decision time loomed, now that I'd arrived back in London. Convinced Brian's flatmates never did like having me there, the search for our own apartment consumed me.

After scanning the rental pages of the papers for weeks, South London seemed the best value for money. And a small 1950s one-bedroom pad in Rusper Court, Stockwell, south of the Thames, (not as salubrious as South Kensington) soon became our new home.

By now, thanks to my efforts and encouragement, Brian had found a new job with Spillers. Unfortunately, with it came the loss of the company car, which is how we found the old Morris Minor van that, with the mattress thrown in the back, would be our home on many future excursions around England and Europe. The one notable feature of our new mode of transport was the gaping hole in the floor, which had rusted away over the years – a very chilly air-conditioner in the midst of winter. But somehow, we survived the torrid conditions.

Fun times. It was a new beginning for both of us. Tiny, with nil atmosphere, our new flat gave us the stability and security to explore our life together. We spent every weekend rummaging through second-hand stores and junk shops for sticks of furniture and kitchen essentials. A second-hand double bed just fitted into the tiny bedroom with its dated built-in wardrobes. No room for bedside tables – the floor sufficed for our one lamp. Two large comfy lounge chairs in rusty red linen with a small square painted coffee table supplied the creature comforts. An antiquated television set perched on another old table at the other end of the room.

Love was in the air, so we decided to throw a house-warming party. Space being at a premium, we were limited to inviting only a few close friends. My friend, Anne, with whom Mum thought I was sharing my new home, spent hours in the kitchen cooking up a storm. In those days, I would never have dreamt of telling my parents I was “living in sin”. I was too

scared of the repercussions. Mum's voice was still ringing in my ears and continued to do for many years. How life has changed. Now, everyone samples before they buy, so to speak.

We chatted and laughed the night away, enjoying Anne's culinary delights and the Aussies sharing stories about how back home we'd be celebrating with a "barbie" in the backyard and a keg of beer for the boys. Freedom oozed out of every pore of my skin, even if I was living a lie with those on the other side of the world. My new relationship sparkled like the diamonds I was about to wear on my finger.

Life settled down, and I developed a daily routine of catching the bus into West End. After shivering for months at the bus stop, I decided to sew myself a new long winter coat to help me survive the freezing temperatures. I wore that trusty blue model for my entire stay in London.

An unexpected visitor early one Sunday morning sent me into a spin. I peered through the peephole in the front door, only to see Uncle Gordon from Australia standing outside. 'Won't be long.' I yelled through the door. *What the hell is he doing here?*

I scrambled into the bedroom to get my boyfriend out of bed.

'Quick, Brian, get dressed and hide in here until I give you the nod.' Mum must have sent Uncle Gordon to check on me. Otherwise, what the hell is he doing here at this ridiculous hour? Furious, I rushed into the bathroom to hide all the incriminating evidence. My head spinning, I yelled through the door again. 'I'm just getting dressed, won't be long.' After all, it was 9 am. What a hide.

After a deep breath, I opened the door and showed my visitor into the loungeroom. 'What a surprise. Mum never told me you were visiting London. When did you arrive?'

'A few days ago. I'm on my own as your Aunty Joy doesn't like planes and long journeys.'

‘Oh really. Please make yourself comfortable while I conjure up a coffee. Or maybe breakfast – have you eaten at this early hour?’

‘I’m fine. Perhaps a piece of toast would be nice, thanks Jan.’

My fingers fumbling as I grabbed the Nescafé, I fought to control my nerves as I switched on the electric jug. What a ludicrous situation, I berated myself. Like a school kid, protecting myself from his prying eyes, I spread the jam over the hot toast. Having seated my intruder out of view, I guided Brian out the door.

‘Come back in an hour,’ I whispered. My head swirling like some kind of criminal, I gently closed the bedroom door, before delivering the morning tea to the loungeroom. I plonked myself down in the chair opposite the front door and took a sip of my coffee, heaving a sigh of relief.

‘Well, what brings you here? Anything planned for the day?’

‘Just wanted to pop in to see how you’re going. Thought we could go out somewhere for the morning. Any ideas, Jan?’

‘Let’s wait until Brian gets here. We had planned to go to Speaker’s Corner in Hyde Park, this afternoon. He should be here around ten o’clock, I think.’

Idle chatter ensued. No hint of his mission, I counted every minute until Brian would make his appearance. No mobiles to text back then – the wait was agonising. What we did that morning now escapes me. Suffice to say, I still believe Uncle Gordon was sent on a spying trip – mission unaccomplished.

Our busy working life added unexpected pressures as we strove to become financially secure, which wasn’t an easy task while living in central London. Rents were high, lamb chops unaffordable and petrol prices increasing. We began bickering over miniscule issues. One wintry Saturday, what started as a civilised discussion escalated into a full-blown argument

over something trivial. Needless to say, I have no recollection of the problem, I only recall that Brian packed his bags and left Rusper Court, heading to our friends in Surrey. Distraught, I sat mulling over my dilemma with nobody to support me. All my friends were long gone. Torrents of tears washed down my cheeks.

Sue, a Jordie who'd married Brian's best mate came to my rescue. In many ways, she'd married below her station. Her upbringing in a middle-class family tested her relationship with Ronnie who'd lived in the same council estates as Brian. In a way, this meant we understood each other and shared the same values and desire to prosper in life.

'Are you okay, Jan? Brian's here pouring his heart out. All sounds a bit petty to me. How about I drive up to London and pick you up?' she suggested over the phone.

'Oh Sue, you're such a sweetie. I'll be ready.' I whimpered.

'Come on now, it's not the end of the world, just a bump in the road. We all have tiffs. Pull yourself together girl.'

Endless thoughts raced through my head as I awaited her arrival. Consumed by the heat of the moment, I tried to douse the fire of negativity. *Should I be in this relationship if it's this hard? Don't be melodramatic, we hardly ever argue. But this was vile. Was it a warning sign of what lay ahead?*

A knock at the door allowed me to escape my torment. Sue wrapped her arms around me. He's in a right, royal state too. Come on, bring some clothes, and stay the night with us. The rest is history.

My new job, working for a medical publishing company in a tiny office in a nondescript back street in the West End cemented our security. Once the office moved to Regent Street in the heart of London, I discovered it was an easy ride on the Northern Line to work each day. I abandoned London's famous red buses for a warmer and easier option.

Little did I realise my new job would give me incredible experience in the business world as Dr Marcus took me under his wing. A Jewish doctor and a maestro in business, he'd left the medical world behind to publish his first medical journal *Update*. We were a tight team of four, with a sales manager who booked the advertising space that kept us alive, and John the creative guy who busied himself with the design and creative layouts. No computers in those days. I became the administrative manager and the boss's confidante during many testing times as the company expanded over the years. As the astute editor grew the company, developing and publishing numerous medical journals, the staff grew, and I took on more and more responsibility. I loved being in charge. Back then, I had no idea how much this valuable experience would influence my career path in the future.

In 1970, the wind fanned the flames in my heart. Plans for my wedding to Brian forged ahead at a rapid pace. I can't remember Brian actually popping the question. Perhaps it just unfolded as we'd peered into jewellers' windows in Covent Garden, the diamond centre of London. No romantic proposals on the top of the Eiffel Tower in Paris like my son planned when he popped the question to his now wife.

My disappointment escalated amidst the excitement when Mum whimpered over the phone one evening, 'Your father and I have decided we won't be coming to London for the wedding.'

The familiar steely silence crept down the line. I hung up.

They don't want to be part of my wedding. Too scared to spend their hard-earned cash on their daughter's special day? My devastation catapulted me into a depth of sadness I'd never experienced before. It consumed my every waking moment as I battled to come to terms with the fact that nobody in my family was interested in sharing the lead up to my wedding – not to mention the most important day in my life.

On March 24, 1970, adorned in top hat and tails, the groom awaited my arrival at the Methodist Church in Mandeville Street, just a few blocks from Oxford Circus. Given I was educated at a Methodist school and later attended Fellowship at Gordon Methodist Church, it seemed a no-brainer to find one in London. This church was one of only a few existing in this predominantly Church of England stronghold.

A typical English day. The rain bucketed down on that chilly March afternoon as I stepped out of the limousine in my white velvet dress with its artificial ostrich feathers tickling my nose. *Was my future husband quivering in his boots too?*

The organ pumped up and my bridesmaid, Philippa, an old school friend, led the small procession wearing an emerald-green velvet dress we'd sewn ourselves to save money.

Standing beside his best man, Brian turned to catch a glimpse as I took my first step down the aisle. In my father's absence, the arm I held onto belonged to Norman, a dear friend whom I'd met on my arrival in the UK. I doggedly strove to enjoy the moment, despite my aura of disappointment. I wondered if Mum and Dad were feeling emotionally cut off too, missing such an important moment in their daughter's life. A grim smile crept across my face.

Looking into Brian's eyes, I murmured the words, 'I do.' Smiling, he repeated his vows. Once the registration papers were signed, the ceremony was over, and the organ struck up the wedding march, Brian and I returned down the aisle. This time my smile was exuberant. I was now Mrs Harris.

As I sat next to Brian at our reception in the Mandeville Hotel, opposite the church, my emotions continued to bounce around – elation one moment, a black hole of sadness the next. Tears trickled down my cheeks as I struggled to hold myself together while someone (I can't remember who) read a message from the Bride's father. Dad had done his best. I knew it must have been painful for him too. He'd just gone along with his wife's fear.

Laughter soon replaced my melancholy as I listened to my husband's speech. Brian was quite the comic.

Next, Norman shared anecdotes about the times we'd spent together since I'd first come into his and Shirley's lives. This also raised my spirits. Norman and Shirley had become my surrogate parents, and even though they are no longer alive, I will always be grateful for their support. Whenever I was feeling lonely, I'd hop on the train to Tadworth in Surrey where they lived and spend the weekend discovering that beautiful part of the country.

Like most wedding breakfasts, the celebration flashed by. A surreal experience. I felt like I was playing a part in a movie, often like an observer watching the main act. Before I knew it, I was bidding our guests farewell in the traditional Aussie way with all our friends congregated in a circle, their arms crossed, swaying from side to side, as we sang "Auld Lang Syne" at the top of our lungs. Then it was time to make our way around the circle. With lots of hugs and kisses, we bid our guests farewell and disappeared up the stairs to the honeymoon suite.

Strong aspirations of joy and happiness embraced me as I opened myself to my new life. Pangs of fear and trepidation stabbed in my head at the same time. *Alone on the other side of the world. Just Brian and me?*

The following day, we flew off to Austria where we would spend our honeymoon – a fun-filled week of skiing together in the tiny village of Niedereau.

To my amusement, the owners of the neat farmhouse kept their mooing cows inside the barn attached to one end of the house. A novel idea as the only cows I'd ever seen were those grazing on sun baked paddocks. Then again, it was freezing, and the poor things needed somewhere to shelter from the pelting snow.

It didn't take long before disappointment eroded my happiness as, on the first morning of our holiday, Brian took off skiing down the mountain, leaving me alone at the top shivering

and quaking in my boots. I'd been the confident skier back home, but these mountains with their large pine trees drooping with icicles were severe and steep. The adrenaline pumped through my veins as, scared stiff, I set off like a novice down the icy track. *And where was Brian? Down the bottom of the mountain? Nowhere to be seen. Perhaps this was an omen?* If so, I ignored it. Let's face it, I was blissfully in love.

After returning from our honeymoon, I embraced married life in Stockwell. My appetite for exploring England and Europe in our grey Morris van was insatiable. Wasn't this the reason I'd travelled half-way around the world? To discover what lay on these distant shores.

Sleeping in the back of our little van offered us the freedom to roam, which we did almost every weekend during the summer months, discovering England's rich heritage. I even encouraged Brian to come with me and my friend Wendy, who had returned from the infamous European trip, to watch the Trooping of the Colour. In those days, the Queen used to inspect the troops, riding side saddle on one of her treasured horses. Brian even admitted that he'd enjoyed this famous tourist spectacle. Interestingly, he'd never attended it as a child with his parents.

As we pottered around London in the winter, I'll never forget the bone-chilling wind that roared up through the rusty gap between the door and floor next to the passenger seat of our old jalopy. It was a real test of survival for this girl from down-under, and I gritted my teeth every time I jumped into the car. *Did anyone think of plugging the hole?* Can't remember. But, every time I think back on the journeys I endured during those freezing English winters, I can still feel the damp and cold penetrating every cell in my body.

Our trip to the Cotswolds, with the limestone cottages tumbling down either side of Broadway's High Street, still remains one of my most favourite holidays.

Built in 1627, the ancient marketplace in Chipping Camden, with its gilded masterpiece of ancient houses each grafted to the next, represents a unique piece of history.

Lower Slaughter with its stillness and beauty remains my favourite village to this day. Considered one of the prettiest villages in the Cotswolds, this tiny hamlet exuded a sense of peace and tranquillity with its limestone cottages straddling the reflective waters of the Eye River – a slow-moving stream crossed by two footbridges.

Our holidays, both abroad as well as around Scotland, the Lake District, and Northern England, fulfilled my dreams. Brian simply came along for the ride as he'd never thought about exploring his country's history and glory before I came on the scene. I lost count of the number of times I found myself standing in the middle of a castle with a plan in my hand, pondering the great hall, piecing floor plans of the kitchens and dining rooms together, working out the layout of the bedrooms and imagining the soldiers defending the fortress.

I felt an affinity with these spartan places and a yearning for more and more history, which I couldn't explain. *Had I lived in some of these austere castles, now mostly in ruins, in another life?* I'd marvel at their precarious locations on rocky outcrops with the treacherous seas pounding below, while my husband waited, bored stiff.

Despite Brian's reticence, I think he did enjoy the weekend jaunts. His poor upbringing had denied him the opportunity to experience the vibrant rolling hills, quaint villages, and often ominous history of his homeland.

Such wonderful memories – I could go on and on. Suffice to say, England's history and vast array of castles and stately homes from Yorkshire to Cornwall left a deep and lasting impression upon me.

Chapter 10

My Insatiable Appetite

All the while, Europe continued to lure me.

‘Let's go touring somewhere in Holland or Germany,’ I suggested to Brian over dinner one evening. ‘What do you reckon? We could camp in the back of the van.’

‘Okay. You decide where to go. I'm easy.’ The next summer holidays, we took our trusty Morris across to the Hook of Holland by ferry. And so, began another journey of discovery.

Miraculously, we found somewhere suitable for an overnight sleep in the old girl on our first stop in Amsterdam. This vibrant city offered us hours of enthrallment, tramping the narrow shop-lined streets and splendid canals, lined with charming gabled houses – some leaning at a rather precarious angle after surviving for centuries as trading houses.

The not-to-be-missed red light district left me speechless. I couldn't stop peering at the girls, who didn't appreciate my curiosity. All shapes and sizes, they sat in their tiny windows as we wandered down the labyrinth of tight lanes. My naïve upbringing left me gobsmacked.

‘How can these girls do this?’

‘Who cares?’ Brian retorted. This sordid place drew me back every time I visited Amsterdam over many years. I was constantly amazed by my own fascination at seeing these fellow members of the female sex displaying their wares in windows. *Surely, I didn't feel an affiliation with these girls too?*

Sleeping on the mattress in the back of the van offered us affordable accommodation, albeit a little risky at times. Parked on the side of a twisting road, high up in the Swiss Alps, we heard a knocking on the front car window in the wee small hours. We lay motionless,

pretending there was nobody in the van. The drumming rhythm in my heart reached a crescendo when they jangled the handle of the locked door. Silently, we awaited our fate.

‘Do you think it's the police?’ I whispered. A replay of my Pisa Railway Station experience exploding in my head. ‘What if they order us out of bed and ask us what we're doing parked up here? We might get locked up for vagrancy?’

‘Shush, we'll be fine.’

We listened to the men jabbering away in German, not understanding a word. After what seemed like an eternity, we heard our visitors get back into their car and drive off. I heaved a huge sigh of relief as I peered out the window to see a police car disappearing down the hill.

‘Whew, that was close.’

‘Yeah, I wasn't sure for a while if we were going to escape,’ Brian replied. ‘That's the last time. From now on, I'm not taking any advice from you about where to camp.’

His voice faded away as I fell back to sleep, snuggling up to keep safe.

Carefree and happy, we continued our journey through the stunning Swiss Alps, revelling in the magnificent scenery, the cow bells ringing high on the mountain tops, and the snow caps melting with the heat of the summer sun. Crystal clear streams tumbled between the tiny houses in quaint villages.

We'd lunch in village squares in these picture postcard spots and enjoy cosy overnight stays beside one of those billowing streams or deep in the forests.

The quest to satisfy my yearning for adventure drove us ever onward. Our arrival in Davos, a famous ski destination for the royals, where the rich and famous flaunted themselves on the snowfields or in the cafes and restaurants, opened my eyes to another world. *Gosh, what a lifestyle. Did I envy them? No, not really. It was all just part of life's rich tapestry.*

Our trip took us to many wonderful cities in Austria and then Germany. As we wound our way back home, we visited Innsbruck, Mozart's wonderful Salzburg, and the Romantic Way in Germany. The walled town of Rothenberg with its spectacular timber houses and picturesque square is just one of the many memorable historical villages which captured my imagination on this famous route. It showed how folk lived in past times and this fascinated me.

‘Wow, what an amazing time we've had,’ I said to Brian as our sojourn into Europe's rich culture was coming to an end.

‘Um, not bad, eh?’ His eyes glued to the road. A smile crept across his face as we headed north to the ferry at Calais.

As I relive these times in our old faithful, I feel privileged and blessed. After so many trips, so many churches, so much unforgettable scenery, my flatmates' treacherous European trip had faded into oblivion. They were all home now, getting married and having babies. We were still travelling.

When we returned to England, I continued to find ways to satisfy my never-ending appetite for travel and adventure, and a trip to Scandinavia was next on our list.

We embarked on this journey with friends the following year. The amazing discovery of the Tollund Man in Silkeborg on the island of Jutland in Denmark blew me away. The naturally mummified corpse of a man who lived during the fourth century BC had been buried in a peat bog, which had the effect of preserving his body beyond belief. He had died by hanging one winter's day and remnants of the rope still remained visible around his neck. According to the story, he was cut down and had his eyes and mouth stitched closed, before being placed in a sleeping position in the bog.

I stood there peering into the glass cabinet, dumbfounded.

‘Look Brian, isn't it amazing? The minuscule details of his head, his eye lashes, fragments of his teeth and particles of hair with his leather hat are all still intact.’ I had never seen human remains, and it seemed unbelievable to me that these had been preserved for almost two thousand years.

Among all the wonderful memories, I recall being amazed by the Viking ships in Norway. In particular, the Vasa warship in the Vasa museum in Stockholm. Built between 1626–1628, it had been restored after sinking on its maiden voyage.

The ancient Viking compounds, Hans Christian Andersen's home, and the famous Tivoli Gardens in Copenhagen all enriched my experience of this remarkable part of the world.

The town of Koblenz, where the Rhine meets the Moselle, was the starting point of another journey. The medieval town of Bernkastel, further down the Moselle with its charming atmosphere enveloped me. My feet stuck to the cobblestones in the square as I absorbed the splendour of one of the best-preserved ancient towns in Germany.

After feasting our eyes on row upon row of adorable, half-timbered, gabled houses dating back to the seventeenth century, we decided to rest in a quaint café in the square to enjoy our morning tea of pastries and freshly brewed coffee. The most photographed site in the town, Spitzhäuschen (Pointed House), a half-timbered, pointed-roofed building built in 1416, served as our backdrop.

Another fond memory is of the university town of Heidelberg with its stunning old town centre and the red-sandstone ruins of its castle hanging off the side of Königstuhl hill, overlooking the river Neckar. The enamelled coasters I bought there remind me of the time we spent wandering around the square mesmerised by the elegance of the shops.

Who can ever forget Neuschwanstein Castle in Fussen? The epitome of a fairy-tale castle in Europe. And Oberammergau, also in the Bavarian Alps. It all blends into a wonderful smorgasbord of pure joy in that fascinating part of the world.

It's hard to believe I've travelled to so many incredible places. The vivid memories remain with me to this day of this precious time that Brian and I enjoyed together. It was a truly magical time, and my thirst for adventure has only recently ceased to consume me as the grey hairs grow more and more silver.

Chapter 11

Home Beckons

A few years on, the cold English weather had leached into every cell of my being and Australia's sun and warmth beckoned me. *But, how could I drag Brian away from his mother?* Despite the guilt threatening to overwhelm me, my desperation to go home intensified, until, finally, my hankering for home became an obsession.

One night after dinner, when Brian seemed to be in a jovial mood, I seized the moment. Teeth clenched, wringing my hands together, I sat down in one of our large comfy armchairs and told him.

‘Brian, I want to go home. It's absorbing my every waking hour.’

‘I know,’ he replied. ‘It's probably time. You know I want a new life in Australia. It's just Mum.’ A stony silence fell over the room. Brian grimaced. ‘I'll just have to break the news to her.’

I heaved a huge sigh of relief. What could I say? I knew I was coming between him and his mother. I convinced myself it was fine, given he only visited her each weekend as a matter of duty. Still, he was an only child and her security.

‘I'll come with you,’ I murmured, dreading the idea but wanting to support my husband.

The following weekend, we broke the news to Billie. Fear spread across her face. Her devastation was painful to watch.

‘When are you going?’

‘We don't know yet,’ Brian replied. ‘We have to visit Australia House and apply to emigrate. Maybe you can join us once we're settled? Just a thought.’

That day was one of the toughest days we'd experienced since we had married. *What was more important: our new life or Brian's duty to his sad, lonely mother?*

It took us days of analysis and justification to accept our decision. Our life was most important. The move meant new opportunities for Brian, and a long-awaited return home for me after three and a half years in London.

All our worldly goods were packed and shipped. And, after a tormented farewell with Billie, we boarded the plane – two emigrants bound for Sydney. I couldn't believe my luck, returning home for just ten pounds.

In Australia, life opened up for us in more ways than we could ever have imagined. Olga and Herman, my parents' American friends who were living in Sydney for some unknown reason, had decided to go back to California for an extended stay.

'Our unit is yours,' Olga told me one evening when we were visiting for dinner.

She'd always been very generous, showering me with jewellery, some of which I've since sold for a handsome sum. Only recently, I gave my granddaughter Eline, the pretty pearl ring she had bought me when I was about eighteen. Olga was special to me in so many ways, loving me unconditionally. I couldn't believe her generosity in giving us a place to stay, what an amazing financial start to our new life.

With a new home in Mosman and a new job for Brian as marketing manager of Edgell's food company in Crows Nest, we were off and running – all in less than twelve months.

Life sprinted ahead at a great pace for Brian. For me, the pace was markedly slower. I caught the ferry into the CBD every day to my monotonous job as a secretary in a one man show, distributing television programmes. How he made any money sitting and talking on the phone every day is beyond my comprehension.

The highlight for me was meeting my new friend Pat who had an equally boring job with a Japanese Bank at the other end of the corridor. With deep brown eyes and a strong vivacious personality, Pat was attractive and always immaculately dressed. Every afternoon,

we'd rendezvous in the utility room to get a bit of a reprieve, chatting away while washing our dishes. It was a testing time for us both, but we did manage to hatch a plan to escape our predicament.

With plenty of time on my hands and an airletter from Olga telling me they were returning in three months' time, I decided to research the housing market.

By the way, in the 1970s, we used to correspond across the world by means of folded airletters, as computers and emails didn't exist.

The housing market research kept me amused, and with the need for a new home looming, the wheels started turning. Within weeks, things started happening. I found a renovator's dream in a lovely street in Mosman. It was quite liveable, just not on the water side.

Excited at the prospect of renovating his first home, Brian had a new lease on life. Something to focus on apart from his work. He busied himself researching colours, sourcing new furniture and planning a new kitchen.

'Let's get pregnant. We can have our babies at the same time.' Pat made this announcement out of the blue over lunch one day as we ate our sandwiches in our usual spot in Hyde Park.

'Great idea. But I haven't even broached the subject with Brian,' I replied.

'Well, off you go. See what happens. I'll do the same with Lance.'

My husband's response, although a bit tardy at first, grew positive within hours of my suggestion.

'Seems like a good idea, I guess.'

'Okay, I'm going off the pill.' My face shone with joy at the prospect of becoming a mother and a stay-at-home wife.

Pat beat me to it by three months. Our success released us from our desk jobs and opened a new chapter in our lives. Pat and I were jubilant. And, I guess, my husband was too. Although I'd never have known.

As I grew larger, poor Billie battled on working and smoking her life away in London. Brian's weekly phone calls to his mother became the highlight in her otherwise miserable existence. I felt so sorry for her, now she was going to miss out on the joy of being a grandmother.

After leaving my job when I was seven months pregnant, I busied myself, knitting complicated patterns for matinee jackets (as they were called in those days), sewing nighties and embroidering little flowers on them, despite the fact I had no idea whether I was having a boy or girl. A "surprise packet" just used to arrive back then. I don't even remember having any ultrasounds. The doctor used to listen to the baby's heartbeat through some fangled bell-shaped instrument on my stomach and discuss how I was feeling. That was about as good as it got.

In the last couple of months, I enjoyed all the preparation – buying furniture and painting the nursery yellow, which would do for either a boy or a girl. Mum bought the bassinet, and I made the sheets and knitted blankets. Excitement filled the air.

After no untoward issues with my pregnancy, my waters broke in the early hours of the morning.

'It's time to go,' I whispered to Brian shaking him awake.

'Err, better ring the hospital,' he groaned and went to make the call.

'Yep, they say to come in.'

After eleven hours of labour with an epidural to assist my low pain threshold, my bundle of joy, Nicole, was grabbed with forceps and delivered. Whilst Brian nursed our little girl, the obstetrician busied himself, putting me back together again. Not the easiest of deliveries as I

spent the next ten days sitting on a rubber cushion in hospital. No, back then we didn't leave for home after a couple of days. They kept us in a good long while. In many ways, there was method in the madness, as we mothers had the opportunity to heal, rest, and learn to breastfeed. Our babies were wheeled into our wards from the nursery every four hours. How different giving birth is these days.

The highlight was our night out together for dinner before we brought our baby home. Where we went and what we did is a distant memory now. All I remember was my excitement at being released from my hospital bed for the night.

Life at home with a new baby was challenging. Exasperated after many sleepless nights, I yelled at Brian in the middle of the night, 'Can't you get up and look after your daughter? I've just fed her, and she's still screaming. You pretend you can't hear, well that's a joke.'

'I have to go to work. It's your job,' he replied, turning onto his side and slipping back to sleep.

Thanks a million. What a supportive husband.

Now I get it, the woman's job was seen to be in the home; the man's job was to be the breadwinner. How things have changed with multi-tasking, staggered hours of employment, and husbands who take a keen interest in bringing up their children.

Back then, I had no choice but to entertain myself – making new friends who had babies, playing tennis, and travelling to the other side of Sydney to visit Pat and her son, Alex. The coffee shop culture didn't exist in those days either. In fact, I don't think there were many cafés at all, only the old-fashioned milk bars.

I accepted my lot, and Dad and Uncle Fred traipsed over to our home almost every weekend to help Brian with the ongoing renovations of our semi-detached. Mum's oldest friend

Aunty Rene used to accompany her husband, both men were retired and happy to be of some use, sharing their expertise with Brian when needed.

A new kitchen overlooking the road, gave me the opportunity to observe the comings and goings of all the neighbours. New white laminated furniture arrived after the lounge/dining room was painted and carpeted. Hot pink striped upholstery, Brian's choice, with Marimekko curtains that were all the go at the time.

Over a couple of years, our home evolved to look like Vogue Living – well, we thought it did. The neighbours on the other side of our semi were also renovating, so we'd pontificate about all the money we were going to make after our projects were completed. Not sure what happened to them, as we were long gone before they sold.

Little did I realise that Mosman was not going to be the only home Brian would want to renovate. History repeated itself when, a few years later, we purchased an old house in its original state in Lindfield. His hard work in Mosman gave us the opportunity to upgrade to this larger home on the North Shore. Sadly, the new reno would never be completed for us to enjoy.

Our new home was a deceased estate, and the old lady had been living in it for a very long time without doing a thing to the place. Luckily, along came Uncle Fred and Aunty Rene, and, together with Mum and Dad, we embarked on our new adventure. Same channel, different place.

Young and enthusiastic, I embraced our new project with excitement, thinking this would be our forever home. A mammoth job lay ahead of us, and Brian immediately busied himself. This time rejigging the rooms. One bedroom was split to create the new main bathroom. The original bathroom with the old gas water heater over the claw bath became our ensuite. The existing kitchen became Mark's bedroom when he arrived a few years later, and the old rooms at the end of the house were earmarked for the family room and new kitchen. Extensions were even proposed when money allowed.

Nicole's bedroom was our priority, as we couldn't have our little girl sleeping in some dust-ridden, musty room. Wallpaper, in vogue in those days, was our saviour as it hid a multitude of marks, dents, and scuffs on her bedroom walls. Carpet laid, Nicole was ready to move into her new bedroom, complete with a large wardrobe to house all her toys. After the installation of the new bathroom, Brian moved on to knocking down walls and building me a new kitchen overlooking the picturesque garden. The original kitchen, in which I'd battled to cook our meals for over twelve months, became the new nursery, despite there being no baby on the horizon.

On reflection, I now realise how patient I was during that time, living with no kitchen, an obsolete bathroom, and shabby carpets throughout the house. But Brian was on a mission, and I had no choice. So, the arduous task continued, taking its toll in unimaginable ways.

Chapter 12

How did it come to this?

Major life-threatening dramas had never plagued my life. Things just bumbled along, until that fateful Monday evening in 1978. The life-changing fire ignited straight after our delicious roast chicken dinner.

‘I’ve got something I need to tell you,’ Brian announced. It was 9 pm, and we sat in our recently renovated family room.

‘I’m leaving you,’ he said in a cold voice, looking down at the floor.

‘What!’ I stammered. ‘Why?’ A choking sensation gripped my throat. The horror of his words rampaged through my mind like a racing car on a collision course.

The fire grew, threatening to overwhelm me. I was in shock. *Could it be?* He was leaving me and our two gorgeous children for Lee, his secretary. I thought we were in an ideal marriage. And Mark, our little baby boy, had been born just over five months ago.

Brian – an unfaithful husband? The fire raged out of control inside of me.

We’d had a stressful couple of years with major renovations to the old dump that he’d was so desperate to buy. Not to mention, the relentless pressure of trying to have another child. I’d been shoving fertility pills down my throat daily like some desperado. Now, I wondered, *Was having another baby really “our” goal? Perhaps, he’d been too gutless to say he didn’t want another child? What the hell did this all mean?*

Tears cascaded down my cheeks. I followed him like a puppy dog into our bedroom where he was gathering his belongings and packing his clothes. I felt as though a python was squeezing me, constricting every muscle.

No, leave him to it! You don’t have to put yourself through this degradation.

I walked back into our family room and plonked myself down on the faded old couch – its once-pink stripes had turned brown. This had been my safe place where I'd spent endless hours playing with Nicole, my busy little four-year-old, and feeding Mark, my newborn.

When Brian returned to the room, he stood in front of me, not a flicker of emotion in his voice.

‘I'm going now.’

‘Please Brian, before you go, sit down and let's talk about this.’

‘No Jan. I've made up my mind. I want a life with Lee.’

‘Lee, your PA? What about your children? They don't deserve this. I can't believe you're doing this,’ I said, gasping for breath.

‘I've already been to see a solicitor a few weeks ago. He's a friend of Lee's, and he advised me that I can see my kids every fortnight. So, I'll be in touch.’

‘You what? You've been planning your departure for weeks? I can't believe this is happening. You bastard!’

What could I have said differently?

Did he expect me to say, ‘Oh darling, you go and enjoy your life. You have my blessing. I'm fine to nurture and bring up your children whilst you fornicate with your secretary?’ *What a miserable sod. Only thinking about his own ends.*

Was it only a week ago that I'd felt so euphoric to see the end of the builders who'd been hanging around for months? I had giggled like a schoolgirl as we stood in the warehouse surrounded by copious shades of beige carpet, trying to choose the right one for our new lounge-room. Pride had oozed out of every pore of my skin, as our dream home received its final touches – a huge deck overlooking sweeping gardens for the kids to play in. No more being cramped on the old front veranda. A swish driveway down to the new double garage,

and a large lounge/dining room to entertain our friends. *Now we can start living like normal people, enjoying our life together*, I had thought.

When Brian closed the front door on our home and life in Grassmere Road that night, I collapsed into the couch.

What a bombshell!

As the car drove away, I grappled with my fear. Alone and bewildered, I desperately needed someone. Relentless thoughts raged through my mind. The turbulent flames of anguish devoured me.

Can't tell my parents at this late hour. I'll ring my sister, she might help.

'Brian has just left me,' I whimpered through my tears.

'We're coming straight over,' Beth replied. They came to my rescue within minutes.

The look of disbelief on my sister's face and her husband Grahame's demeanour when they arrived said it all. Beth reached out and pulled me into a hug, her own tears welling. Grahame stood behind her with a stunned expression on his face.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw a little face peeping around the corner of her bedroom. Nicole had woken up.

'Everything's okay, darling,' Beth soothed. 'Let's get you back to bed. It's the middle of the night.' She took Nicole by the hand, and led her back into her room, whispering in her ear as she went.

Grahame and I sat down in the family room. He stared at the floor. An awkward silence hung over us. In my surreal world, my mind darted from one thought to another.

'I'll ring him, Jan. Tell him what a huge mistake he's making,' Grahame tried to reassure me. 'He'll regret this decision. Leaving his beautiful children. This is crazy. Unbelievable. Madness.'

‘Whatever it is, Grahame,’ I blubbered. ‘He’s just told me he’s not going to change his mind.’ We returned to our silence until Beth joined us.

‘She’s asleep now. It’s midnight. You must be exhausted,’ said Beth. ‘We’ll let you get to bed. I’ll ring you tomorrow.’

‘Okay.’ I kissed my sister, muttered a thank you and fell into the empty bed. My thoughts churned over and over. I got not a wink of sleep. My mind raced out of control. *How will Nicole and Mark ever understand their Daddy is never going to live with them again? Were our problems that bad? Why didn’t he tell me he wasn’t happy? Gutless.*

That night and every night for years afterwards, I tossed in bed like a raging lion trying to catch a few hours’ sleep. I struggled to come to terms with the surreal drama in which I found myself. My heart palpitated like a drum beating non-stop in my chest.

Day and night, my mind reeled with the endless thoughts that harangued me. *Isn’t it normal for relationships to have their ups and downs? When did he get it into his head to leave? It must’ve been well before the carpet expedition.*

My journey of constant pain began that night. The fire had well and truly taken hold, and it would continue to smoulder within me, until my world collapsed into ashes and only a few gaunt, blackened trees survived.

I remembered the fateful night in London when I’d first met Brian. Attractive with stark blue eyes and a long Beatles haircut, he took my fancy the moment I set eyes on him.

I was infatuated. Determined to ensure he’d feel the same way. Always available for dates at the quaint pubs and raging nightclubs during our whirlwind romance. I saw him as the man of my dreams. *What a pathetic excuse for a man he’d turned out to be!*

Night after night, sitting on the couch after I’d put the kids to bed, I tried to piece the puzzle together. No wonder he arrived home at 2 am after playing his squash tournaments. And

I was foolish enough to believe him? But then, you do trust your husband, even if the games run to the wee small hours. The idea he was anywhere else never entered my head.

Another piece of the puzzle was his high-powered job. As Marketing Manager for an American company, he'd been kept busy beyond the call of duty, travelling overseas to conferences and meetings with the parent company. Meanwhile, I had been running around like a crazy woman preparing for our new baby's arrival as well as looking after my gorgeous little girl. Bitter thoughts tortured me. *Maybe the spark had been flickering for years? Perhaps these conventions were no more than a luscious feast laid on a silver platter for the unfaithful to have their wicked way?* I fitted the next piece into the puzzle. *Not much chance for our relationship to survive in that frenetic corporate world.*

Looking back, I have no idea how we got through those tortured first months. I lived in survival mode, preparing bottles night and day to feed my little boy. Helping Nicole with the puzzles she loved. Always trying to console her.

Mum and Dad would drop by. Dad would play with Nicole in her bedroom, giving me a bit of space to get my head together for a few hours.

Mum often cooked a meal or nursed Mark if he was unsettled. Lucky for me, he was such a good baby – sleeping, eating, sleeping, eating most of the time. So, any stress around looking after him was minimal compared with the anxiety that overwhelmed me as I confronted the idea of spending the rest of my life as a single mother.

I hated the thought of my new reality. Despite having read Germaine Greer's controversial book, [*The Female Eunuch*](#), I felt none of the freedom she purported would come from being a single woman, unfettered by the chains of matrimony. That book may have created a storm in the Women's movement back in 1970, but in 1978, I felt miles away from Greer's beliefs. Freedom didn't even enter my consciousness.

I simply staggered on from one day to the next with no time to consider my part in the play, my reactions or the opportunities to learn from this life changing experience. I just hung in there, lost in the smoke haze of rejection.

Chapter 13

Survival

‘It's imperative your husband has regular access. A continuing relationship with their father is a pivotal part of your children's development and security now he's no longer living with you,’ the social worker told me, in a pseudo mothering voice.

When I met this middle-aged woman for the first time, her kind eyes and gentle demeanour led me into a false sense of security. I thought I had an ally who would support me with Nicole's trauma. She'd understand it was hell on earth for me. Instead, I spent an hour each week trying to escape the onslaught of her suggestions that I should make compromises, whilst sitting opposite my estranged husband. He'd only been gone a couple of months, yet it was so hard for me to accept this man had left my life forever.

‘How can I comfort my daughter when she's screaming at the top of her lungs on the roadway as her father drives away after every visit?’ I sobbed. ‘I'm not going to put her through this, every two weeks. It's not fair on my little girl.’

‘Perhaps we can organise for Nicole to see a children's counsellor. It will help her to understand her loss,’ she suggested.

Who are these strangers infiltrating my world and turning it upside down? Is this woman really trying to solve my problems? Is this happening to any of my other friends? Their husbands seem to be loyal and honest. Am I such a bad person? Such a terrible wife? So impossible to live with? The thoughts spewed from my mind like lava erupting from a volcano. Each week, I battled to accept her instructions, until one morning, a month later, Brian announced that he wasn't coming back for another meeting. *What a relief.*

Still, Nicole's suffering consumed me. I knew there was nothing I could do to cushion her sadness. Too young to comprehend her loss, her pain was like an impenetrable abyss. And it was there, right in my gut too, as I tried to console her. *Could anyone understand our*

anguish? I roamed, lost in my blackened world. After three visits to the child psychologist and many black drawings, I decided to quit.

‘Where's this taking us? Nowhere. Nicole's still just as distraught every time she sees her father. I'm not making another appointment,’ I told the counsellor. I stomped out of her office, feeling like I'd unleashed Nicole and set her free.

Fortunately, Mark's innocence saved him the torment. He lay in his carry basket in his own little world, smiling and cooing at me.

Almost fifty years later, I understand the devastating effect that my inability to accept Brian's bleak attitude toward me had on my daughter's life. As a little girl, she was torn between her devotion to her father, who had inexplicably disappeared, and her dependence on her mother as the only constant in her tiny world. Sometimes, a poor excuse for a mother, locked in my cage of despair. My burning hatred of her father in those early days must have caused her great pain. I believe it's taken her most of her forty-odd years to come to terms with her loss.

Next, it was my turn, not with a social worker though. Instead, I joined a dismal gathering of deserted wives and suffering husbands at the Marriage Guidance Council at Milsons Point. In the 1970s, this organisation acted as the lifeline for those in dysfunctional marriages or suffering separation. Every Tuesday night, I'd leave my Lindfield home right at dinner time, desperate to find some solace. Mum and Dad looked after the kids, begrudging their duty as they had no understanding of my pain.

In their own way, they were both suffering. Mum was caught up in her own grief and more importantly her own drama. *What on earth would her friends think about her daughter's marriage breaking down?* And Dad agonised quietly, disappointed after everything he had done to support Brian. As an only child, he had developed a kinship with his son-in-law that

filled a gap in his life. I felt sorry for Dad as I knew he was going to miss helping Brian around our home.

The group sessions supported me in some vague way.

‘My wife took all the money. I’m left with nothing,’ one fellow announced one evening. Never allowed to rescue the poor sod, we’d all nod in disapproval, blank looks on our faces.

‘Oh, my husband has been a loner all his life. Don’t know why he married me. Didn’t want a wife, just a house cleaner and bottle washer,’ another woman said.

I persisted for a month, sitting in the circle, wondering what I was doing there.

‘I’ve had enough, this is not achieving anything,’ I said to a new-found friend from the group. ‘I’m out of here, hope we can catch up soon though.’ Looking back, I realise it was my first step into the world of self-observation.

As the months passed by, my inability to cope with reality grew. It had all landed in my lap. I knew I needed help. I had no desire to keep going, my shoulders buckled under with the heavy weight of looking after my tiny baby, Mark. Getting up in the middle of the night every night, feeding him, and settling him as he screamed with wind pains left me exhausted. Every chore overwhelmed me. Nicole needed me more than ever as she battled to understand the loss of her father. And I knew that her daily routine at kindergarten was essential to maintain her sanity and mine.

Meeting the other mothers who chatted about their wonderful husbands as they waited at the gate for their kids didn’t help. Wherever I went, whatever I did, I was confronted with my fate – like rubbing salt into my wound. I could barely put one foot in front of the other as I strived to hold our lives together. *Where could I turn for help?*

Six months after Brian’s departure, I sat in the psychiatrist’s waiting room, insipid artwork adorning the walls. Plush velvet chairs from the 1960s surrounded a cherry wood coffee table crammed with *Vogue Living* and *Women’s Weekly* magazines.

She had been recommended to me by my charming GP and the shingle on the wall outside the office indicated that she was highly respected in her profession. So, I was surprised with all the head nodding at our initial meeting. She uttered not a single word of encouragement or advice. For an hour each week, I'd psych myself up for another onslaught of her patronising gestures. After a couple of consultations, she handed me a prescription. 'These anti-depressants will help you feel much better,' she said. 'I'll increase your dose gradually.'

My mind swirled. Shell-shocked, I descended into the carpark. My head felt caught in a vice of anxiety. I thought this woman would help me to deal with my depression – make some suggestions, give me some advice on how to handle my life, not pump me full of pills.

For weeks, I dutifully swallowed my little pink pills. Then she added some white ones to the cocktail. My foggy head debilitated me. I struggled to cook meals for Nicole and Mark. I felt barely able to take care of them, let alone clean the house. I detached from reality, sitting for hours "away with the pixies". Rather than being a lucid mother, I felt like a drug addict, hooked on tranquillisers and anti-psychotic drugs. *Did this woman consider the repercussions of having me bombed out of my brain?*

'It's probably best if you can make arrangements to spend a couple of weeks in Ryde Psychiatric Hospital as part of your recovery,' my wonder-woman said during one of our subsequent sessions, a vacant look on her face. *Has the whole world gone mad? What audacity to suggest I be locked up in some mental hospital. Am I surrounded by crazy people wherever I turn? I have two children to look after.*

After dutifully following her increasing prescriptions and wandering around in a stupor for a few months, I realised I had to get out of this mess. Fearful that I could lose my darlings, I knew I had to escape my bizarre world.

After taking my fix one morning, I heaved it all back up again into the kitchen sink. My head thumped. *That's it, I'm never going to pop another pill. I'll do whatever it takes to free myself of these mind-changing drugs forever.*

Going cold turkey wasn't fun. The suffering I endured has left a vivid imprint on my consciousness. I've avoided taking prescription drugs ever since, becoming a “natural girl”.

At the end of it all, a gentle wave of relief washed over me. *I'm me again, whoever that may be.* That day, I decided to extinguish the flames of bitterness and search for the power to battle my demons of insecurity. *Where is that strong woman hidden deep inside?* I vowed to find her and draw on her strength from now on.

Little did I know, my resolve would soon be tested.

Chapter 14

A Day in Court

The Family Law Court has to be one of the most emotionally charged places I've ever had the misfortune to visit. Depressed faces greet you at every turn. Frenetic solicitors and barristers scurry from pillar to post, making a fortune at the expense of their clients' misery. *Could it be?* I felt it was a sad reflection on society back then, and it probably still is today. The unspoken message from the prosecutors seemed to go something like this, 'Walk away, don't take any responsibility for your family and shack up with the next innocent victim.' *Was I being too cynical or just realistic?* Compassion for each other appeared to have gone out the door. "Everyone for themselves" seemed to be the catchcry throughout the day I spent in court.

My ex-husband's solicitor strutted up and down the room. A pot-bellied man, all of five-foot-two-inches tall, his arrogance set the scene for battle. His negotiation with my lawyers seemed to give him a sense of power and control. As he coerced Brian into offering me as little as possible, my respect for my ex-husband and his lawyer diminished by the second. *Has this man no conscience? How could Brian be so easily swayed by such a clever manipulator? Worse still, what was Brian allowing this up-start to do? Offer the best solution for his children or win the game to their detriment?*

On this wretched day, the flames engulfed me once more. As the negotiations went on, I grew weaker and weaker. I had once stood like a strong gum tree, now I felt raw, seared, my bark peeled away, consumed in the heat. I buckled and crashed to the ground.

'Sell the house.' The words rang in my ears.

'\$25 per child. Agree?'

'Right, let's go before the court.'

‘Is it that simple?’ I asked my barrister as he shuffled his papers. Though he was quick to take his fee of 700 bucks for the day, which I could ill afford, he'd only bothered to read my file as we entered the court. *He doesn't give a hoot about my welfare either.*

‘Mrs Harris, are you in agreement with a settlement of \$25 per child per week, and the proceeds from the sale of your house with a \$15,000 mortgage to purchase a suitable residence?’ asked the Judge.

‘Err ... yes, Your Honour,’ I murmured, hardly able to string two words together. I felt like a pawn being shoved around the board as the game of custody and maintenance played out.

‘Are you sure about this arrangement, Mrs. Harris?’

‘Err ... yes, Your Honour.’

With the documents stamped, I walked out of the court, barely able to put one foot in front of the other. Disillusioned and mentally exhausted, I was relieved that the day in court had finished. Was I happy? Not at all. I had ended up financially strapped and excommunicated to the far-flung suburb of Westleigh. Being forced to face a new, lesser life was not my idea of a fair and equitable outcome.

Like so many women who find themselves in the same situation today, I had been tortured and subdued by the system. It was all about giving the spouse as little as possible, a contest to see which lawyer could win. I felt I was being punished for a crime in which I was not the guilty party. I was too weak to argue against this treatment. I had no idea of the world of hardship I was about to face.

Chapter 15

My Rock

Living as a single woman, separated from my husband gave me the weirdest feeling. As though my life had become a phantasmagorical experience.

When Brian dropped the kids home every two weeks, he seemed like a total stranger. Not long before, he'd been lying in bed beside me, making love, cuddling, and kissing. Aghast, I stood at the front door and listened to the man I'd loved with such passion telling me, 'I've decided to stop paying the electricity and telephone bills.'

'What are you talking about? Are you suggesting that we live electricity and no phone? I don't have any money,' I yelled.

'You can get a job,' he replied, his face a blank canvas.

'What? With two kids under the age of five? What realm are you living in?' I slammed the door in his face.

Every fortnight, I would clench my jaw when the knock on the door came. My palms sweated as I'd open it for the next onslaught. Another argument over money. Brian seemed hellbent on giving us as little as possible. Bewildered by his lack of concern for his two children, I fought as hard as I could.

'My solicitor told me I only have to pay you \$25 per child,' he said one Sunday afternoon.

'Oh, so it's about what you have to pay, is it? Don't you actually want to give your children what they deserve?' But no, it seemed that his new life in Rozelle was more important.

When, a week after the court hearing, he broke the horrific news that he wanted me to sell our home in Lindfield – our safe haven – shivers rolled down my spine. My head started

spinning. My body shook relentlessly. I struggled to stay on my feet. I knew our world was about to change forever.

It did little to allay my feelings of loss and anger when my ex-husband reminded me of his munificence in taking on a small mortgage to purchase a new, much humbler, house for his children.

‘What a generous offer,’ I snapped. ‘Am I supposed to feel eternally grateful that you are caring for your kids by providing them with a home in the boondocks and the minimum weekly maintenance payment? You must be joking.’ Once again, I slammed the door on him.

In the months that followed, while I waited for the hammer to fall on the sale of our beloved home, my Chinese neighbour, Helen, came to my rescue. She became my rock and my saviour during my long struggle to come to terms with my new reality.

Born in the western suburbs of Sydney to market gardening parents, Helen had no illusions of grandeur. She had married at a young age. Her husband a Hong Kong born accountant drove around in a black Mercedes. I watched their house across the road from mine grow into a mansion. *Geez, they must have plenty of money – building a mansion and driving around in a flash car.*

After she moved into her new home, we soon made friends. It didn't take me long to realise that Helen had a caring nature, despite her apparent wealth. Our brief waves to each other, soon grew to morning coffees, taking turns to drive our kids to the local kindergarten, and sharing our secrets.

She'd ring me almost every day.

‘Want to come over for a swim?’ Over we’d go. I was happy to escape my prison of loneliness. The kids all played in the swimming pool, laughing, and screaming at the top of their lungs. Over a cuppa, I’d pour my heart out to Helen.

‘Can you believe it, Helen? It’s just five months since Mark’s birth, and Brian’s gone. I thought he would be my partner forever. Fancy letting me suffer for months, trying to get pregnant, while he was busy having an affair with another woman? He didn’t even have the courage to sit down and tell me he was unhappy.’

‘Yeah, I know. I can’t believe it,’ she replied. I’d kill him if he was my husband.’

The immense and overwhelming joy I felt on giving birth to my precious son had been marred by this betrayal. ‘This sure is the coward’s way out. I feel so angry.’ I wailed.

‘Come on, stay for dinner? You can’t go home in this state,’ she’d say night after night, wrapping her arms around her poor mate.

My dearest friend looked after us over many months as I slowly came to terms with my “new norm” as a single mother. Nicole loved Auntie Helen’s Chinese cooking. She gobbled up the yummy flavours, obviously preferring Chinese delicacies to my meat and three veg.

Quite a few lessons were required to get the gist of their cutlery though. It didn’t help that I’m lefthanded. There was much fun and laughter around the dinner table as we almost poked each other’s eyes out with our chopsticks.

Helen valued her extended family and spent many weekends entertaining the aunts and uncles and all their siblings. The men stood around the BBQ in true Aussie fashion, cooking copious amounts of marinated soy chicken legs, lamb chops, and steak. The women busied themselves in the kitchen, preparing a variety of scrumptious salads. Huge cheesecakes for dessert topped off the amazing feast. I felt so grateful that we were always included in these family functions, birthdays, anniversaries – whatever the excuse for a family reunion. My only frustration was that I couldn’t hold a conversation with Helen’s mother, Mrs. Can, when she

visited. Although I knew she was a kind soul, “hello” and “how are you” was about as far as it ever went. She'd never learnt English, even though she'd moved from China for her arranged marriage in her late teens and her husband spoke perfect English. I guess it ensured all her grandchildren spoke Chinese from an early age. Although in many ways, their culture was different to our Australian way of life, I loved being part of their life.

Helen's son, Andrew, who was two months older than Nicole, had a myriad of toys showered upon him by his father. Nicole enjoyed playing with the never-ending stream of toys, including Fisher-Price garages, airports, speeding cars, racetracks, and loads more. It didn't seem to faze her that they were all boy's toys, she just played whatever game Andrew dictated – happy to be with her best friend. There were very few altercations.

Month after month, Helen supported me as I cried the pain and loss away. Most of my other married friends had deserted me due to my new status as a single woman. My sister invited me to join them for Sunday lunch from time to time. That was as good as it got. As I reflect on that torturous time, I wonder whether I would have survived those dark days without my loyal friend.

‘That word “love” is all too easily bandied about. What does that word “love” really mean?’ I asked Helen over afternoon tea.

‘I often wonder myself. I'm lucky, I have a husband who adores me.’

A few decades on, I continue to contemplate this question with no real clarity. As hard as it is to define, I think love is something we all hope and strive to experience during our lifetime.

All I felt sure of back then was that, if I went down, the whole ship would go down. And I could not let that happen. My love for Nicole and Mark kept me going when the feelings of helplessness and utter fear for our future devoured me. I battled to hold our lives together over the ensuing years. I worked my butt off.

As time went by, I discovered an incredible strength deep inside me, and the knowledge grew within me that we would survive and grow closer.

Chapter 16

Enter Graeme

Internet dating didn't exist in the 1980s. So, how did one meet a member of the opposite sex with two small children and no money? It was almost impossible.

Parents Without Partners (PWP) met on Saturday nights, and I decided to give it a go. This support group for lonely separated husbands and wives became my stomping ground every other weekend. A gathering of misfits, me included, all seeking the same goal – to find someone new. I trotted along for many months, meeting different men each time.

One night, the room exuded a heavy feeling of gloom. A middle-aged man wandered over to me and introduced himself. Before I even had a chance to tell him my name, he was off.

‘You can't imagine how I've been mistreated,’ he moaned. ‘It's so unfair. I'm so depressed.’

‘Oh really?’ I replied, leaning against the kitchen bench. ‘I can only imagine how tough it's been for you.’ My eyes wandered around the room, I needed to get away.

‘Excuse me, my friend needs me,’ I said and ducked off to introduce myself to a few people who looked as though they were enjoying themselves, laughing on the balcony.

I've never been one for large groups, and this rather depressing environment did my head in. I used to come home more disheartened than when I set out.

On the odd occasion, I'd give one of the more well-adjusted men a go. Some of the relationships spanned a couple of months; others only lasted a few weeks. They all ended in disaster. Too hard, too much baggage, too complicated.

Max was a typical example. At first, he impressed me with his Rolls Royce, his business dealings, and his soft-spoken voice. But, after a few dinners at fancy restaurants, he started to come on heavy. I bolted for the door. He did not want commitment – just a partner in bed.

Another fellow, who I remember gave me all the right cues, was a nice-looking chap with four children. That in itself should have been a red light, but I persisted with the idea of getting to know him. I ended up folding his washing and cleaning his messy kitchen.

It didn't take me long to realise that none of these lonely human beings were the right fit for me. I was over it. I decided that the “poor me” population of divorced men at Parents Without Partners just didn't cut it for me. I had better things to do than to subject myself to their misfortunes and depressing stories.

Joining a tennis club seemed much more fun. So, every Saturday afternoon, I'd grab my tennis racquet and head off to the local courts. My hands shook with nerves as I stepped onto the court to play doubles with my new tennis mates.

My mind flashed to my debut at the White City Tennis Venue in Edgecliff. The same nervous reaction had plagued me when I represented Ravenswood at the interschool championships back in the dim, dark ages.

My legs had wobbled like jelly in my first match, and I disgraced myself with an appalling defeat. But I had to play on. I'll never forget the humiliation on that hallowed ground. That was my last foray into tennis competitions.

The venue used to host live entertainment as well as major tennis events. The concerts I attended at White City in the 1960s, featuring Ray Charles, an amazing Jazz Musician, and Lisa Minnelli's mother, Judy Garland, are among my happier memories. It's sad to think that high rise apartments have replaced one of Sydney's icons.

In the 80s, despite my initial anxious moments, tennis became my saviour whilst Nicole and Mark were absent. It helped to fill the hole of loneliness in my heart. I don't remember

making any friends, but I do recall many enjoyable Saturday afternoons on the court. I loved playing tennis.

All the while, I continued to keep an eye out for a new partner to share my life with. In a moment of madness, one chilly afternoon in Autumn, whilst the kids were at school and kindly, I picked up the phone and rang one of Sydney's exclusive dating agencies. *What am I doing? How has it come to this? How can I afford hundreds of dollars?*

Embarrassed and uncertain, I spoke to the receptionist who answered my enquiry with respect and care.

‘How do I go about using your services please?’

‘I’ll put the registration form in the mail to you today, Jan. Just fill it out and pop it in the post to us,’ the girl explained. ‘Your address?’

I didn't tell a soul, not even my best friend across the road. I felt exhilarated as I wrote my profile. My strengths? Um ... My hobbies? Aside from tennis, I had no time for these, with two kids to look after. So, I made them up. I laid out the cash. I was away.

A few strange first dates with more weirdos ensued until, one evening, I found myself chatting to an intelligent-sounding guy over the phone. We talked for what seemed like hours. Alarm bells rang in my brain when I heard his English accent. *Another Brit? Why was I so attracted to these Englishmen?*

I knew I couldn't stand Aussie “ockers” with their beer swilling and fixation on rugby, but I'd already had one disaster with a Cockney. *Why risk another?* My antennae went up, and sirens blared in my head, but I convinced myself to meet this Graeme. After all, he'd gone to great lengths to tell me about his parents who lived in a stone cottage in a small village just outside Cambridge. A far cry, I thought, from a council flat in London like Brian. *Another only child though?* On the plus side, Graeme had been living in Australia for many years.

I arranged for him to come to my home in Lindfield one Saturday afternoon while Nicole and Mark were on their fortnightly stay with their father. When I opened the door, a well-dressed man, not good looking, but well presented with an air of confidence stood before me.

‘Hello, I’m Graeme.’

‘Hello, I’m Jan. Do come in,’ my voice trembled with nervous tension.

I never gave a thought to the consequences of inviting a stranger into my safe haven. I always trusted the universe, and it never even entered my head to meet at a café or a park, like you would these days. *Was I innocent or just plain stupid?*

I felt safe though, and I was looking forward to getting to know this spunky guy. He looked immaculate in a crisply ironed beige-striped linen shirt, with matching canvas jeans and shiny brown casual shoes. His small piercing brown eyes and tendency to smirk unsettled me slightly. But his smooth talking and quiet demeanour ensured that I soon forgot about these disconcerting features.

‘How about going for a drive and a coffee?’

‘Why not?’

I grabbed my handbag – because a girl never goes out without enough money to get home – and headed up our steep driveway to the road. I jumped into his orange Fiat convertible, and we took off.

I loved sports cars. With the top down, the sun warmed my face against the chill of the Autumn breeze. Another déjà vu moment echoed in my mind. I remembered how, when I was eighteen, Ian had impressed me with his MG TC. Now, I was in another soft-top. This time in a little car I had never seen before. My body tingled with excitement.

As my clothes swirled around me in the stream of wind, I felt I was entering a world of glamour and money. Well, so I thought. And with good reason. After all, he'd just told me he was an accountant with a large corporate company in the city.

I smiled from ear to ear as the car hummed its way down Mona Vale Road towards the northern beaches. I kicked back and relaxed as we chatted non-stop. Little did I know, I was already being lured into his tangled web.

Secretly, I had always yearned for the high life with fancy restaurants and expensive clothes. I had never been fortunate enough to experience life in the fast lane. As he parked the car in Avalon village, I believed that he was about to fulfil my fantasy. Sheer stupidity now that I reflect on it. But at the time, the lavish gifts of gold jewellery, French handbags, and endless bunches of red roses every time he took me out captivated me. All the while, he was reeling me in until I succumbed to his indulgences and control. Common sense had flown out the door.

As our relationship grew, Graeme knew all the right things to say to me. His passion and lovemaking were exhilarating. He whispered “sweet nothings” in my ear.

I closed my mind to the warning signs – his strange innuendos, his weird manner at times, and the fact that he had run away to Gretna Green to marry his first wife. I convinced myself I was in love, again.

My parents saw my new romance in a different light. They were worried sick about my new man. The reality was clear to them and perhaps to my friends. But I never took the risk of asking their opinion. It seems like utter madness to me now. As I reflect on my whirlwind romance with the power of hindsight, I'm astonished by my inability to see the wood from the trees.

Once more a blaze of flames was burning out of control in my heart. This time they were flames of passion. I was a needy girl involved with a needy man. We were both

determined to make the most of our encounter. Deep inside, I knew I was on a collision course. He wasn't the right man for me. But I could not stop.

Over time, his controlling nature began to rear its ugly head. But I always found an excuse for his behaviour. I yearned to be free of the stigma of my single woman status, and Graeme seemed to be my way out.

One evening, a few months after we met, as I sat in the family room in my Lindfield home mulling over my predicament, I realised I had to escape from his clutches. Until then, I had not wanted to deal with this uncomfortable truth as I was loving the high life. I could not avoid it any longer. So, that night, during our evening chat, after I'd tucked the kids up in bed, I plucked up all my courage, and I told him it was over.

Details of our conversation are sketchy now, other than to say his insistence to keep going was a hurdle I had difficulty overcoming. To my credit, I stood firm in my convictions. We didn't see each other for a few weeks. But eventually, the needy part of me won. I weakened and allowed him back into my world.

That decision would turn out to be one of the biggest mistakes of my life.

Chapter 17

Banishment

As the months slid by, punctuated by the highs and lows of my relationship with Graeme, my fury at Brian waned, and the heated exchanges diminished. The sale of our family home had been completed, our new abode purchased. It was time for the dreaded move.

Years of accumulated junk surrounded me – dirty implements from the past owner stored under the foundations of the house had to be removed. A lifetime of belongings had to be packed. It all fell on my shoulders, the heavy load weighing me down.

Graeme was missing in action. In the end, my elderly parents came to my rescue. I often wonder how I would have coped without their loving support.

Westleigh was not just a few kilometres away, like our family home in Lindfield had been. I was dreading being so far away from Mum and Dad. We were reaching a point in our lives, where we had started to accept each other. Mum's attempts at control no longer bothered me, and I knew I would miss having her and Dad around.

‘It'll be a new adventure, a new school and lots of new friends,’ I told Nicole, trying to convince her of a rosy future in the wilderness. Surrounded by boxes, a torrent of unstoppable tears ran like a river tracing its way over rugged rocks, leaving the debris of our life's drama scattered on its banks.

The removal truck packed and ready to go, the time had arrived to bid farewell to our beloved home, my caring neighbours, and the friends who had supported me during this torrid part of my life. In my heart, I knew this new phase of my life wasn't going to be easy. But I had to put my best foot forward for my kids. Overwhelmed and stricken with sadness, I said goodbye to Grassmere Road where we'd lived for the past six years. So many memories lingered – renovating the old dump, bringing up my children, and having my stalwart right across the road. An unknown world awaited us. Alone. My desperation to bring happiness into

my children's lives consumed me. In the end they were fine, and I was the one who struggled most with the move.

Nicole started at her new school the day after we arrived. Too young to understand the repercussions of the new chapter, she simply made new friends and her life carried on. She was fine, thank goodness. Mark just came along for the ride. At three, he hadn't started kindly yet and had no idea what was happening. He was happy as long as he was with his Mum.

Bewildered and uncertain as to what lay ahead, I set about unpacking and trying to build our new life. The house was adequate – a four-year-old dark brick and tile with three bedrooms, a small garden, and an above ground pool, which delighted the kids.

Never-ending thoughts filtered through my mind. *At least there's not much maintenance here with the odd tree and a few mulched gardens. Not attractive like my large old garden of towering gums and flowering shrubs in Lindfield. But beggars can't be choosers. Make the best of it, girl.*

I worried over the trip I would have to make to Chatswood three days in every week – where I would work at my three-hour job in the leather store. It presented a challenge, given the distance. Not only was I driving three quarters of an hour door to door, but I also had to drop Mark off at the babysitter's home for his brief stay each day. *Was it worth it? Yes, it was.* The job was essential for my sanity, I reassured myself. It was a huge plus in my isolated world, providing me with company for a few hours a day and interaction with other adults.

Little did I realise that John the full-time sales assistant was dealing drugs on the side. I presume the owners were equally naïve. Now I understand it was how he handled the boredom of the job. It involved serving an endless stream of budding leather workers, who came in to purchase their favourite stamps, leather thonging, and glues, which they used to create belts, handbags, and such. An interesting hobby for the retired and obsessed artisans, but mindless work for John and me.

Releasing my emotional ties to our family home had been like breaking the chains of my security. Now, ensconced in our new home, I realised I had to make the best of our lot and try to maintain my stability in order to hold our lives together.

Whilst sipping my morning cuppa in our courtyard, the sun drenching my weakened persona, I recalled Jampolsky, a psychiatrist renowned for developing the *Twelve Principles of Attitudinal Healing*. His words rang in my ears.

When we release the fearful past and forgive everyone, we will experience total love and oneness with all ... Forgiveness is letting go of the past and is therefore the means for correcting our misperceptions.

How many times had I read those words? That morning, I made the decision to abandon all my false hopes that Brian would ever meet his obligations. I took on the role of both parents, acting as the breadwinner and the source of constant security for my two children. Jampolsky's book *Love is Letting Go of Fear* would be my bible and saviour for many years.

The work of forgiveness? Well, that was a much longer journey.

Tears still well up in my eyes as I reflect on those torturous years, recalling how I battled the pain and suffering each day, determined to survive. With no friends to support and feed us, we were all alone. Even with Brian's death years later, and his physical presence no longer plaguing me, the scars he left still run deep.

Important events in our lives leave impressions that can never to be erased. We can't change the past – all we can do is acknowledge and accept it and be grateful for the lessons learnt.

Miracles do happen, and my life settled down – for a while.

Then Graeme moved in.

We had hatched plans for our wedding before I was banished to the new house in the back of beyond.

When the Minister questioned me on my decision before we left Lindfield, a nagging feeling churned in my tummy.

‘Are you sure you know what you're doing? Graeme's first marriage was at Gretna Green.’

‘Yes, I know he eloped. His mother didn't like her and wouldn't give them her blessing.’

‘So, you feel this is the right decision for you Jan?’

‘Yes, I'm positive,’ I replied becoming agitated at his interference.

I carried on, knowing in my heart that I was caught in a trap.

A brief interlude of fun times followed with my dear friend Helen. She had gladly accepted my invitation to be my matron of honour – that's what we called bridesmaids who were already married in those days.

The day we spent shopping for our outfits in the city still remains a wonderful memory. We giggled like a couple of schoolgirls as we tried on endless dresses while the saleswoman insisted that each one looked stunning. I settled on a cream model with an embroidered net bodice and a gathered flowing ankle-length skirt. Helen chose my favourite colour, mauve, in a similar design.

‘Whew,’ I panted. ‘I'm glad to be out of there. Gosh she was a pushy saleswoman.’

‘Yeah, she sure was. At least we've managed to get ourselves two stunning dresses.’

Helen laughed as we headed up the street. ‘Let's find ourselves some shoes now.’

Cream shoes were the go for me to match my outfit, and I can't remember what Helen ended up with – certainly not mauve. All I know is the heels were so high, we could hardly balance. Never to be worn again.

‘Not sure how we're going to manage walking up the aisle in these,’ I giggled.

‘We'll be right. These stilettos will go perfectly with the length of our dresses. They'll look fantastic.’ And they did.

The day my second marriage took place at Gordon United Church was uneventful. My beautiful Nicole walked ahead of me up the aisle. I felt special as I followed her on my father's arm. A proud day for him too. Although, I wonder what he was really thinking, given Mum had taken a distinct disliking to Graeme long before we arrived at this day.

Mark's duty was to hold the rings. My cute little boy was dressed in a pair of black shorts and a white shirt, which I had made for him. He endeared everyone present at the ceremony.

I tried to make it a happy occasion, despite my inner voice berating me. The service was just like every other wedding ceremony, nothing out of the ordinary. And just like that, I was no longer Mrs. Harris.

My most vivid memory is of my family and friends joining us in my new home for the celebration. Everyone encouraged me. They were delighted that I had found happiness. Or so, they thought.

In fact, I was far from free. Soon after our wedding, Graeme's anger reared its ugly head. He constantly loomed in the background, controlling my life. Straight away, he set about changing the kid's names to his surname. He interfered with my decision-making and discipline. I felt powerless. I was walking a tightrope, scared stiff and constantly worried that, if I fell, my kids would suffer at the hands of my new domineering husband.

What the hell have I done?

Despite being exhausted from the ordeal of moving and getting married, I soldiered on. A feeling of regret permeated every cell in my body. My heart ached with sorrow. Ashamed, I felt like a wimp – too afraid of his reactions to protect Nicole and Mark. His discipline, particularly of Mark, was heartbreaking. A feeling of deep despair had a strangle hold on me. I couldn't escape the fire that once again burned out of control in my chest.

Arguments at night after the kids were in bed became the norm.

‘Who do you think you are? What would you know about bringing up children? You've never had any. Experimenting with mine isn't going to happen, you can be sure of that.’

‘You watch me.’

‘Don't you dare tell me what to do with my children. They're not yours.’

‘I'm living here, and they'll do what I say.’

‘You keep out of it and mind your own business,’ I wailed as more tears trickled down my cheeks.

The yelling escalated with each encounter as, exasperated, I strove to stand up to him and protect my kids. All the same, his anger scared the living daylights out of me. I remember one night as I cowered in our bedroom during one of his rampages. He yanked the handle off the door and hurled it across the room, missing my face by millimetres and leaving a gaping hole in the wall. I was petrified.

Bruises on my body became the norm and, on one occasion, I found myself making up stories to explain why I had a black eye where he'd hit me. I felt humiliated, trapped in his clutches. As Mark grew up, I hoped he wouldn't remember his mother cowering under his bed with his door locked, awaiting her husband's retreat in his drunken stupor.

I tried to accept my lot and struggled to hold our lives together. *How could I admit to anyone that I'd made another mistake?*

Then, one evening, this crazy man grabbed a carving knife from the kitchen drawer and took off down the road at what seemed like a hundred kilometres per hour. I sat on the lounge, stunned.

Do I ring the Police? Do I wait until he returns? What will happen to me if he does come back? There were no women's shelters back then.

Time ticked by, and in the early hours of the morning, Graeme returned. He walked straight into the bathroom. I followed him and watched as he flushed a number of little red pills down the toilet. *Is he taking drugs? Is this what's causing his bizarre behaviour?*

He stomped out into the lounge room, plonking himself on the three-seater. I slunk into the opposite chair, speechless.

Graeme's behaviour opened up a whole new world to me. I had been brought up in a middle-class family where Mum and Dad had arguments, but they never resorted to violence. Now, I realised that I was trapped in a relationship with a psychopath.

‘I'm sorry, this will never happen again.’ His voice quivered.

Huh, how many times have I heard this? Always the same apologetic demeanour – demure and assuring me of a peaceful life together.

A dark cloud of silence hung over the room as I contemplated my dilemma, and more importantly, the safety of my children. I had become a prisoner in my own home. *How did I find myself caught up in this drama? Desperation, loneliness, fear? All of that and perhaps more?* Terror gripped me tightly in its vice again.

‘Okay,’ I stammered. ‘Let's put this behind us. But, if it ever happens again, this marriage is over.’

He took my hand and led me into the bedroom. I asked him about the red pills. He made some pathetic excuse. I believed him.

Flames of fury burned out of control in my belly – his antics, relentless. Do I need to say that nothing changed? Like all violent relationships, the perpetrator, when tested and angry, has no control over his behaviour.

Why do women, especially with children, go back time and time again into violent relationships? Call it being conned? Emotional blackmail? Whatever their reasons, I share my empathy with them. I know what it's like. I understand their lack of power and fear.

I cringe today as I watch the telly and the numbers continually increase. Desperate women without any financial help. In fact, without any help at all. It pains me to see the stress placed on our police officers as they endeavour to handle the domestic violence crisis day and night.

Chapter 18

An Unexpected Interlude

September 1981

I opened my eyes to peek around the room. A large vase of vivid orange and yellow flowers mixed with foliage of nature's subtle hues welcomed me back. I lay motionless. The stark white walls swirled around me as I tried to focus. The smell of antiseptic permeated the air. The crisp sheets settled over my wounded body.

‘I wish this was happening to me not you,’ Beth whispered in my ear. My sister's face looked strained. ‘It's not fair. You're only thirty-two – too young to have cancer.’

I appreciated her concern, but nothing could plug the deep pit of despair I felt.

‘You rest now, I'll come back later.’ Beth leant over the bed to kiss my forehead.

Bottles hung from my tummy like bats from the treetops. A catheter supported my bodily functions. I struggled to breathe through the discomfort of tubes protruding from my nose. Too scared to budge, afraid the paraphernalia might dislodge, I closed my eyes. My mind drifted from one thought to another. My throat felt parched from the anaesthetic. Tears rolled down my pallid cheeks. My head thumped. I struggled to focus my hazy mind as it threatened to float away into another realm. Finally, I gave in to sleep. As I drifted off, I knew two things: I had survived, and I was about to face the greatest challenge of my life.

Thoughts began to flash like movie scenes in my mind as I replayed the past two weeks. A regular check-up at my new medical centre had changed my life in an instant. One minute, I had been a healthy woman, living a normal life; the next I was facing death.

My GP had pressed and prodded my breast. Then she became alarmed. Sitting me down, she told me, ‘I've found a lump. I'll book you into hospital.’

Before I knew it, I was off and running. First a biopsy, then a radical mastectomy in the Seventh Day Adventist Hospital in Wahroonga, an upper north shore suburb of Sydney. My journey of ten days confined to a hospital bed was about to unfold.

‘Would you like to try and eat something?’ a sweet nurse asked me. *Eat? I'm barely lucid.* But my tummy rumbled. So, I nodded my head.

Another nurse appeared at the door.

‘Everything alright?’ she asked in a jovial manner. *What's this woman talking about? Does she think I'm full of the joys of spring?*

‘The doctor will be around to see you late this afternoon. Oh, and your parents are here.’

My parents walked towards me, anxiety etched into their faces like deep crevasses in an outback landscape. A grim smile crept across my mother's face.

‘How are you dear?’ she asked, taking my hand.

‘Fine.’ I mustered a weak smile. My face told the story of my ordeal, which had included a blood transfusion and hours under the knife.

With my right arm bound to my chest like a fish caught in a net, my limbs splayed out on the bed like lead weights, and tubes protruding from every orifice, I felt like a prisoner. Mum and Dad sat beside me, unable to find the right words to console me. A heavy silence hung in the room.

The day after my operation, my surgeon visited me. He was a stern man with silver grey hair, thinning on top, and steely blue eyes.

‘The pathology results of the lymph glands I took will be back in a few days' time,’ he told me.

A wave of fear washed over me. I knew if my glands were infected, the cancer could spread throughout my body, and my chance of survival would be jeopardised. I didn't realise this would not be my last experience of cancer. Two years later, I'd be back.

‘We're going to put you on a trial,’ Dr S continued. ‘We'll give you chemotherapy intravenously on day three and day seven.’

Ugh, now I'm a guinea pig as well?

‘He's brilliant with the knife,’ the nurses assured me. ‘You have an amazing scar.’

Thirty-nine staples stretching across my body to my armpit, and I have a neat scar?

As I peered into the mirror for the first time since my operation, wobbling on my pegs like an old drunk, I took a quick glimpse and looked away, horrified at what I saw. I tried desperately to come to terms with the loss of my boob, telling myself, ‘I'm still the same person inside, even though part of my femininity is chopped off and my lymph glands are gone forever.’

I braced myself day after day as I peered in the mirror and tried to reassure myself that I would win this battle. I searched for the strength to push myself along the rocky road ahead.
Get your act together, girl. You can do it!

Sure enough, on day three, John, a caring male nurse, stood beside me stroking one arm as the doctor pushed the needle into the other.

‘This is a new trial,’ he reminded me.

‘To take your mind off that ghastly sick feeling,’ John whispered, ‘try to listen to your heartbeat with the stethoscope. It will help with the nausea.’

“Try” being the operative word. This generous offer had little or no effect as I battled to listen to my heartbeat whilst they pumped the poison into my vein. An injection of Maxolon was shoved into another vein to ease the nausea.

I'm on a merry-go-round and can't jump off. Or at least that's what it felt like as the injections continued all day with little relief. *And I have to go through this again in four days?* My tummy churned like a cement mixer. No matter how hard I tried to concentrate on my heartbeat, the sickly feeling overpowered me.

'In a week, you'll have the results from pathology and let's hope your worst fears are allayed,' John smiled, trying to pacify me.

My two little ones, Nicole and Mark, visited me with my mother and father who were looking after them for the ten days I was in hospital. They brought me such joy and relief with so many stories to tell Mummy. Graeme had to work, and it pleased me that the children would not be staying alone with him.

'Don't jump onto the bed,' my father reprimanded Mark in an angry voice. I watch him cowering.

'He's alright. Just be careful of Mummy's chest,' I intervened.

'I will Mummy. What's that?'

'That's where Mummy had her operation. I've been very sick, but I'm okay now.'

In his innocence, he had no idea what was happening. So tiny and so happy in his own world. Nicole was seven and more aware. She would sit beside me, holding my hand. She never said a word. I loved them so much and looked forward to their faces peeping around the door each day.

My family and friends tried to console me, but nobody knew what to say. Perhaps in part they were facing their own mortality? I started rescuing them by poking fun at myself with a cheeky grin like it was an everyday event. But the game playing devoured what little energy I could muster. They'd leave, and I'd fall into a deep sleep, relieved that they were gone.

Still, the visitors continued to pour in. The never-ending bunches of flowers with their sweet perfumes engulfed my room until it looked like a florist shop. I didn't feel sociable but

put my best foot forward until one day I surrendered; I couldn't cope any longer. I asked for a sign to be stuck on my door. It read: NO VISITORS.

The inevitable question popped into my head day after day. *Will I live, or will I die?* As I woke in the silence of the early morning on day four, a sense of peace consumed me. Ready for the next bout, a little voice in my head comforted me. *Life doesn't matter. Accept your mortality.* It felt like a miracle. I was back in control, my mind my best friend. I knew then that I was the creator of my reality.

‘It's good news, the cancer hasn't spread to your lymph glands. It was only in your milk ducts,’ Dr S told me on his routine morning visit. His solemn face conjured up a poor excuse for a smile. My eyes lit up ... *I am going to live.* Relief washed over me like a torrent of water gushing down a cliff face into a crystal stream.

Each day rolled into the next, and the fast-paced hospital life spurred me on as the idea of recovery overpowered my thoughts.

One of the toughest battles I faced was trying to overcome my insomnia. On the Tuesday night, I lay awake for hours. Desperate, I wondered, *will I ever sleep?* I freaked out. Pressed the buzzer. Pressed it again. And again. Nobody came.

The nurse eventually sauntered in to tell me she couldn't give me any more sleeping tablets without a prescription from the doctor. *Ugh, more red tape.*

After what seemed like forever, I heard the clanking of the trolleys and the monotonous hum of the cleaner polishing the floors. I knew I'd survived another night.

‘Call my GP please,’ I begged. ‘She'll help me.’ After all, she had put the wheels in motion after my visit just over a week ago. I trusted her.

‘I’m worried that I will never get better if I don’t sleep,’ I told her when she arrived later in the morning. ‘I know it’s my greatest healer, and I’m thrashing around in this bed like some renegade.’

‘Yes, I understand. You’ve been through a huge ordeal. I think it’s best if you discuss your feelings with a psychiatrist. Are you happy if I organise for Dr James to visit you?’

Really? A psychiatrist? Again? I’d been down that road before, and I didn’t like it one little bit. I hoped this one would be better.

‘I’ll pop in again in the next day or so.’ My saviour disappeared out the door. Her words of reassurance had set my mind at rest a little.

Dr James arrived the following day. A kind-looking man, he was soft spoken with an air of positivity. He asked me a few questions.

‘I believe the problem is that you are unable to acknowledge and accept you’ve had cancer. Your mind is struggling to come to terms with your operation.’

Well, that doesn’t surprise me, given I was bombed out of my brain on some kind of hallucinogenic drug between the biopsy and the operation.

‘What I want you to do is look into the mirror every day and say to yourself, “I have had cancer. I have had cancer. I have had cancer.” Continue doing this until I see you in my rooms in a couple of weeks.’

‘Um, thank you Doctor,’ I replied, a little sceptical. ‘I’ll do my best.’

And I did. I faced my disfigured body every day, and, like a parrot, I repeated my mantra. My life force began to creep back.

On day eight, one of the nursing staff asked me to do her a favour.

‘Would you be kind enough to visit a patient up the hallway? She’s had plastic surgery, and she’s not coping. I’m sure you can calm her down.’

Why are they asking me? What have I done to deserve this?

I wandered up the hallway, somewhat reluctant about the task bestowed upon me. I peeped around the corner of her room. *Another florist shop.* Amidst the blooms, I saw her sitting upright in her bed in a forlorn state.

‘Hello, my name's Jan. I believe you've been through the mill too,’ I said in a tentative voice. I didn't know this woman from a bar of soap or even what her operation involved.

‘Yes, I just had two breast implants,’ she replied.

‘You're lucky, I've just had one removed.’

‘Oh, you poor thing.’ Off we went, chatting about anything and everything, laughing and joking, until I became so weary that I had to excuse myself.

‘Time for a rest,’ I said. As I turned towards the door, I noticed that I was leaving a happy face. Mission accomplished.

‘What on earth did you say to her?’ one of the nurses asked me later. ‘You're a miracle worker. She's up and about now and happy as can be.’ I smiled.

Meanwhile, I continued my mirror mantra ritual, and each day, as I stood in front of the mirror, my acceptance strengthened. With the net removed, I was able to slowly manoeuvre myself onto my side. This allowed me to grab a few more hours sleep. My black circles disappeared.

My physiotherapy commenced, and I strove to regain the movement in my right arm, which I could raise just above my waist with great difficulty.

In a few days, I'd be returning home. I felt so happy. I couldn't wait to be reunited with Nicole and Mark again. I missed them so much during my time in hospital. And Graeme? Well, I'd see how that went.

As I packed my bag, I felt immense gratitude towards the nurses. They were my saviours. Their Christian kindness and caring had pulled me through the past fortnight. That, and the delicious vegetarian food.

I counted my blessings, thankful that I'd been in such a special place. So many lovely chats as I yacked to everyone who had passed by, so many laughs and jokes. Once, after chatting with one of my favourite nurses, who'd been raised an Adventist but seemed a bit of a reprobate, often bucking the system, I even contemplated converting. A fleeting thought. I soon convinced myself that their beliefs were too strict and rigid for me. I didn't fit into their mould. Nonetheless, I had felt uplifted by the serene voices that drifted around the ward each morning as the nurses and staff sang their daily hymns at full pitch. The radiance which spread across their faces expressed their dedication to their mission. It was contagious. *Must be something to this daily ritual.*

Time to say my goodbyes. I fought back tears as I thanked my angels for their love and support. I walked down the pathway flanked by brightly coloured annuals, shadowed by large maple trees and a vibrant purple Jacaranda, pondering the challenge of entering the real world again. It would take hard work to regain my strength and peace of mind.

Going home to a rented townhouse in North Ryde, I wondered how we'd ended up there. In the midst of all the drama surrounding my illness and treatment, Graeme had suggested that we sell Westleigh, and, in my pathetic state, I had gone along with his suggestion.

I sat on my comfy two-seater with a packet of frozen peas strategically stuck under my armpit to reduce the swelling (icepacks weren't heard of in those days), with plenty of time to contemplate my life. My thoughts bounced around. *How did I end up here? Why did this happen to me? What did I do to deserve this at thirty-two?*

It did not take long before the answers began to poke their heads through the haze: the pain of losing Brian, the stress of my divorce, the struggle to raise my children on my own in such financial hardship over the past two years. Yes, it all made sense.

I knew I had to find a way to leave the trauma of the past month behind. I accepted it may take months, if not years, to come to terms with my new reality. And I had no idea how this experience would influence my future thinking and growth. All I could think was that I had Graeme and he would look after us.

Or so I believed.

Chapter 19

Escape

'I've booked a surprise in December. I think you need a break after all you've been through.' Graeme startled me with this announcement one Saturday morning.

I had become his combatant, embroiled in a battle of wills over his recent pill popping.

This insanity, so foreign to me, frightened the living daylights out of me. *How had I managed to marry an addict whose behaviour manifested in psychological warfare?*

On his return from these crazy rampages, his apologies always seemed so sincere. Fooled by his powerful influence on me, his melancholy demeanour lured me back into his tangled web each time. *I had nobody to turn to, nobody in whom to confide. How could I admit I'd made another mistake?*

Isolated and broken emotionally, I seized upon his offer and looked forward to our holiday, despite the fact that the conflict continued without mercy right up to the day of our departure.

To add insult to injury, his mother Olive had landed on our doorstep from the UK. She had lost her husband unexpectedly to a massive heart attack. A stocky little woman with the same piercing brown eyes as her son, she exuded all the airs and graces of the landed gentry rather than her middle-class existence in a tiny village outside Cambridge. Graeme had never even mentioned that she would be coming with us on this special holiday.

Oh, and the hits just kept on coming. Sometime before our departure, Graeme dropped yet another bombshell.

'I've seen a block of land in St Ives. It will be perfect for us, and you'll be back near your friends again,' he told me.

I had no inkling he'd even been looking, but then again, I had no idea most of the time what he was thinking or doing. *Another delusional idea about year into our marriage. What's wrong with this demented man? He's up to his old tricks again, always trying to impress everyone, especially his mother.*

You can guess what happened. I went along with this mad capped idea, using my equity in our home to purchase the land. And, of course, the rest is history. The house never got built, and most of my money disappeared.

When the holiday finally arrived, and we pulled up outside the opulent penthouse, after a tedious drive from Sydney, I was ready for ten days of bliss, marred only by the fact that I had to share my holiday with my overbearing mother-in-law.

As I wandered around the sumptuous rooms, amazed at the sheer indulgence of this yuppy holiday destination, which I knew we could ill afford, my irritation with his mother's intrusion was written all over my face. I'd always been an open book, and I had no intention of hiding my frustration. I detested the fact that I was being forced to share my holiday with this woman. *His mother is a master of manipulation.* I prepared myself for a roller coaster ride.

The shimmering waters of Shoal Bay beckoned from the picture window in the lounge room, and the stunning vista calmed me a little. So, after Nicole and Mark had settled into their room, the kids and I wandered hand in hand across the road to the water's edge for a paddle. Excited to be on holidays, they kicked and splashed in the crystal-clear water, creating never-ending patterns in the sand. Their laughter was music to my ears, especially after my recent nightmare in hospital. I reminded myself that this was supposed to be my time to revitalise and rejuvenate. And I savoured every moment with my two cherished little ones, basking in their

innocent delight. I could feel my body relaxing. The stress and strain melted away like the chocolate dribbling down my kids' faces as they licked their Drumsticks.

I decided then and there on the beach to put my best foot forward. *I'm strong, I'm not going to allow mother or son to affect me.* After all, I'd survived his violence for over a year now – suffering through all the blackeyes he dished out and ducking the door handle as it catapulted across the bedroom. Not to mention, the continuous verbal abuse I'd been subjected to since this man had entered my life.

After dinner, I tucked the kids up in their bunks and plopped myself down on the grey leather three-seater. Idle chitter and chatter passed the night away, as Graeme downed glass after glass of neat Johnny Walker Black Label. Around 10 pm, his mother went to bed with some feeble excuse of fatigue after the long drive.

‘Do you have to drink until you're inebriated?’ I whispered, my voice quivering like an arrow about to hit the bull's-eye.

‘Mind your own bleeding business,’ he yelled, grabbing for the half empty bottle.

‘I'm out of here. I didn't come on holiday for this. More of the same. Big-noting yourself with your mother in this fancy place. Nothing's changed.’ I stomped into the bedroom.

‘Who do you think you are?’ He staggered after me. My mind felt like a wild animal racing amid the madness – an all too familiar feeling during my eighteen-month journey of cruelty with this raving lunatic.

‘I've had enough of you telling me what I can and can't do.’ I started to undress.

In his alcoholic stupor, he yelled abuse as I battled to try and escape his fury.

‘You bitch. You slut.’ He swayed in the doorway, staggered towards me like a grizzly bear, his face grimacing with anger. Thrusting me onto the king-sized bed, he lashed out at me, smashing my body onto the mattress. His intent to smother me was clear. He was completely

out of control. Overpowered, I felt I was choking, fighting for my life as I wriggled and squirmed on the bed.

He kept shoving my face into the feather pillow, pushing harder and harder. I gasped for air as I tried to fight him with all my might, struggling to stay alive.

‘You must free yourself from this maniac's fury,’ a voice whispered in my head.

He loosened his hold on me for a second, and I broke loose from his iron grip. I fell onto the thick shag carpet like a rag doll. Petrified, I crawled on all fours towards the door. My body aching, I hid in the next room under Nicole's bed. My heart palpitated like bongo drums beating a wild African song. I heard him stumbling down the hallway, cursing and swearing, before collapsing on the floor in the lounge room.

It was midnight.

I peeked around the corner of the room. A sense of relief washed over my battered body. I gritted my teeth and took a deep breath, before I stormed into his mother's bedroom.

‘Do you have any idea what just happened?’ I stammered. ‘Your son tried to kill me.’

‘What did you say to him to make him so angry?’ she retorted. ‘I heard you arguing and shouting.’

I stretched out my hand, knowing the conversation was a pointless exercise. ‘Can you please give me some money for the bus? The children and I are leaving.’

Olive thrust a \$50 note in my hand. I walked out of her room, never to see her again. Little did I realise the impact that night would have on my life.

In the early hours of the morning, as I shoved my clothes into a suitcase, tears of fear and sadness fell down my cheeks like a relentless waterfall. I wasn't sure when the maniac would surface from his unconscious state, so I hurried back into the kids' bedroom to pack their clothes before waking them from their deep slumber.

‘What's happening, Mummy?’ asked Nicole, looking worried and scared.

‘We’re catching the bus to Newcastle,’ I replied, throwing some clothes on my three-year-old son.

‘Let’s go. Quick as you can.’ I put my finger to my lips as we crept past their stepfather. ‘Don’t make a sound.’ Feeling like a criminal escaping from jail, I eased the front door open and ushered the kids down the stairs to the roadside.

My head shook in disbelief. *Whew, we’re safe now.* My babies had no idea what was happening. At 5 am, the road was deserted. Anyone in their right mind was asleep.

‘Let’s get to that telephone box, so I can ring Uncle Grahame. I’ll ask him to come and pick us up at Hornsby Station.’ I fumbled for loose change in my latest pay-off from Graeme, a shiny, red leather Gucci purse. I found a few dollars in the zippered compartment. A miracle, as he loved to keep me penniless.

Half asleep, Beth told me that Grahame would drive to Newcastle and meet us at the bus terminus next to the railway station. With no mobile phones, that was our last contact until he pulled up about an hour after our bus had dropped us off.

While we were waiting for the bus to Newcastle, I made the decision to walk away from my husband’s abuse and violent behaviour forever. His rhetoric, ‘You’ll never get a job. Nobody will ever employ you,’ disappeared into the recesses of my mind. I knew we’d survive without him.

As the bus headed towards Newcastle Railway Station, I stared out the window, watching the dawn break in vivid shades of pink across the sky. Brilliant rays of light announced a new day. A powerful metaphor for our new life.

Many years later, when I opened the local newspaper, the *North Shore Times*, a picture leapt out at me. It was Graeme dressed as Henry VIII. The story told of his fifth marriage. *Following in his hero’s footsteps? So, did that make me Anne Boleyn – one of two wives who*

had their heads chopped off? At least, I'd managed to stay alive, even if, metaphorically speaking, I had been married to a murderer.

I chuckled to myself. Poor “Catherine Howard” – whomever she might be – she too was doomed for beheading.

CHAPTER 20

New Beginnings

When we arrived in Newcastle, Nicole and Mark ran around me in ever-diminishing circles, while I sat anxiously awaiting Grahame's arrival at the railway station.

My body slumped with relief as he pulled up and loaded our belongings into his boot. While the kids slept in the back seat, I poured my heart out, my face carved with deep crevices of worry. Grahame sat in silence, listening to my account of the previous night's horrific experience. Stunned, he kept his eyes on the road and his foot firmly planted on the accelerator. I didn't mind. I didn't need his feedback. I just needed someone to listen as I offloaded my trauma. I was trying to convince myself that the time had come to let go.

After two hours on the expressway, we made our way through the suburbs until we pulled up outside my sister's home in West Pymble. She greeted us with open arms. One of the few occasions when she showed me much emotion.

My relationship with Beth always felt fractured due to the eleven-year age difference between us. I was still a kid when she dressed up in layers of petticoats that supported her swirling skirts. Her broderie anglaise blouses all neatly ironed for the occasion.

Square dancing at the Trocadero dance hall in the city was her favourite pastime. That's where she met her "beau" Grahame. He had a rich tone of voice and used to do the calling at those dances. *Did she dance with anyone else? I guess she wasn't sitting on the sideline all night.*

I remember seeing my future brother-in-law's little Renault, which looked like a beetle, pull up outside our home in Willoughby when he came to pick her up. They'd dine out at Sydney's fancy restaurants every Friday night after Grahame finished reading the seven o'clock news on 2GB. *What a whirlwind romance at nineteen years of age.*

Beth and I shared a bedroom, and sometimes I'd pretend I was asleep when she'd creep into bed after a night on the town. I was eight and had no idea what an amazing life Beth was enjoying. Given our age difference, she never really featured much in *my* world either. I do recall how much I looked up to her though.

I also fondly remember when Grahame helped me with a school project which secured the top mark in the class. I was proud and happy he had taken the time to support me. Of course, I didn't admit he had done the whole layout and probably stuck down the pictures. I guess the teacher worked it out.

Beth married Grahame when I was twelve years old. Mum had insisted she wait until she was twenty-one. As junior bridesmaid, I loved every moment of her wedding day. I made my grand entrance leading the procession at Shore Grammar School Chapel in North Sydney. I gingerly took one step after the next up the aisle at an exaggeratedly slow pace. I felt like a princess with everyone's eyes peering at my skinny torso in my floating turquoise organza dress. It's a day I still treasure – the visit to the hairdresser, getting dressed, all the fuss and glamour, not to mention the neighbours farewelling us in our fancy limousines. My bridesmaid debut turned out to be the only time I would have this privilege, which disappoints me to this day.

I still cherish a photo I have of Beth and I sitting on the swing together when I was a baby because it shows a closeness we rarely shared during my childhood and later years.

I wonder if she felt like an only child growing up too.

I often felt banished to the periphery of her world. Always an outsider in her life. It seemed to me that she lived in an all-consuming realm that consisted only of Beth, her husband, and her girls.

As an adult, I've tried to shrug off the discontentment I felt about my solitary childhood. Now and then, particularly during major family traumas, I've tried to step into my role as her

sister. Sometimes it works, and at other times, I'm left with the impression that I'm not needed.

The painful day we lost my nephew still rings in my ears like orchestral cymbals. The following day, I rushed around and tried my best to comfort my sister. But both Beth and Grahame were like closed books as they struggled to deal with their shock and loss. I felt it was important for me to be there.

Recently, whilst we were away on our Easter holiday together, Nicole and Mark mentioned how cut off they both felt during that family loss.

‘We were told we were too young to go to the funeral,’ Nicole told me. ‘Who were they to say what we should or shouldn't do?’ A pang of guilt clutched at my chest.

‘I'm so sorry that I didn't say anything, darling. I didn't realise you were so upset.’ *But then again, would anyone have listened to me in those days? The oddball sister, what would she know?*

When Dad passed away, Beth took over and the familiar feeling of being superfluous overpowered me. *Perhaps she thought it was her role as the older sister?*

The time leading up to his passing had been a tough and involved a lot of travelling to and from the hospital, but I'm forever grateful that I had some special times with Dad, sitting beside his bed. I was with him when he took his last breath.

‘Take that oxygen bottle away,’ I scolded the nurse. ‘Dad has gone.’ I sat with him in the silence until the family came to say their goodbyes.

I insisted on being present when the funeral was being arranged and having my input. Asserting myself wasn't a problem, despite my grief. I knew I had to do what I needed to do, to say goodbye to Dad.

‘I want to say something at the funeral,’ I told Beth.

She agreed and, in the end, I managed to tell my story about Dad.

Mum's passing, eighteen months later, was a different story, and one I regret to this day. For many weeks, I'd made the same journey from my home in the country to Ryde where she was placed to see out her last days.

Then, from nowhere, she started vomiting black muck – I never did understand how it all happened. The nurse had assured me that she'd last until the next morning, so I went back to my friend's home where I was staying. WRONG.

Sadly, Mum passed away alone, choosing to take her last breath in the early hours of that morning. *Maybe she wanted it that way? I will never know.* Suffice to say, after Beth rang me, I rushed to the nursing home where I spent time alone with Mum in a cold, austere room. I will never forget carrying the bag containing her few belongings to the car. *Is this how it all ends – a few bits and pieces in a plastic shopping bag?*

I wasn't given the opportunity to speak at Mum's funeral. The service had been arranged without my involvement. But I insisted on reading Christina Rossetti's poem *Remember Me*. I felt I had the right to be part of saying goodbye to Mum.

These memories are all in the past now. And I strive to maintain a caring and loving relationship with my sister. I've learnt to forgive and forget – a hard lesson for someone who used to hang onto the past and suffer its misery.

Back in her kitchen that fateful morning in 1981, after our midnight escape from Graeme, Beth's unexpected warmth soothed and comforted me.

‘A cup of tea? Toast?’ she offered as I gathered up Nicole and Mark. ‘You must all be starving.’

Over breakfast, I sobbed. 'I will not let that man anywhere near us again.' Needless to say, Beth and Grahame nodded in agreement. This was their second rescue mission. I hated my predicament.

'Don't let him back into your home. You must start a new life and leave him behind you,' Grahame said. 'You'd better go to the court and get an AVO as soon as you can.'

'An AVO? What's that?'

'An Aggravated Violence Order. It means he can't enter your house.'

'Oh, okay.' A new world was opening to me. I'd never heard of such a thing, but I knew he was right. I had to protect myself and my little ones.

Two weeks later, my husband rang to say he wanted to pick up his stuff. I stood in the doorway and handed the two suitcases over. He knew I wasn't about to invite him in.

'Want to back date our separation to May, so we can get this thing over quickly?'

I nodded. 'What about my money?'

'I'll sell the land and give you what's left.'

And that's exactly what happened. I received \$11,000 – half the amount I started off with. I consoled myself that at least he'd not devoured *all* my money. I knew that with so little money a hard road lay ahead of me, but at least, I was rid of him.

At the interview for what would be my first job after being out of the work force for so many years, I brought up my concern that I had two small kids.

'That shouldn't be a problem,' said Karl, the salesman. 'I presume you have someone to look after them if they get sick?' *Gosh, he must really want me.*

'Oh, yes my parents are always there for me.'

'Good, then let's move on to your job description – any experience with debtors and creditors?'

Nodding my head furiously, whilst lying through my teeth about my non-existent knowledge of bookkeeping, I managed to give him all the assurance he wanted. *What on earth were debits and credits?* I'd find out. I needed the job.

Although my trusty father came to my rescue – a retired accountant, his training set me on the right track – balancing the books at the end of each month was never my forte. Fortunately, my organisational skills and ability to deal with clients and keep everyone happy, including my two bosses, outshone my poor debit and credit performance.

Graeme, you were so wrong. I did find a job far easier than I had imagined, despite your poisoning my mind with your never-ending indoctrination of my hopelessness. I now know your desperation to hold me prisoner was imperative to guarantee your own security.

One evening, not long after starting work at the pool equipment company in Lane Cove, we were all relaxing after dinner in my loungeroom at North Ryde, when Mum piped up.

‘Dad and I have been thinking that you may have to keep paying rent here for a very long time. We're not really happy about it. So, we've decided that we'd like to lend you some money – say \$50,000? Enough to secure a deposit on a home of your own.’

Tears welled in my eyes. ‘Oh Mum, I can't believe what you're saying,’ I stammered. I rushed over to her chair and threw my arms around her. I hugged her so tightly it's a wonder I didn't hurt the poor woman. Then I moved over to Dad.

‘Thank you, Dad. I'm so happy. Do you reckon I can secure a mortgage with what I'm earning at my job though?’

‘I'm sure you'll be fine, love.’

Searching for our new house was fun, and it didn't take long to find the ideal home close to Mum and Dad's in West Pymble. After the war, the Government had built small “war veterans” timber cottages in the new suburbs surrounding Sydney. Our modest abode fitted the

bill with three small bedrooms, an L-shaped lounge and dining area, and a kitchen (in need of renovation). An added bonus – an extension out the back allowed me to have tenants to supplement my income. Perfect. We had the stability and security we desperately needed.

Despite my initial concern, my job enabled me to get that much needed mortgage.

Life in the office was turbulent as the sales manager and Geoff, the owner, were always at loggerheads. Somehow, I managed to manoeuvre my way through the minefields until the sales manager walked out in disgust one afternoon. *Yippee*. His departure allowed me to step up and run the business.

After that, I enjoyed my days at work for over three years. I ran a tight ship, giving Geoff a hard time when he'd forget to wrap the parcels or deliver them to the post office. His friend Les, who was a chemist and a clever man, repaired the equipment that continually flowed into our office. Les also helped to keep my life sane. He worked part time. He would waft into the office whenever he felt like it, and then work into the night to keep our clients happy.

Geoff was like an absent-minded professor. He generally roamed around, occasionally visiting clients, pacifying them, and selling add-ons. I'm not sure what he actually did, other than drive the business into the doldrums. Although, as the owner, he was in charge of the finances, he had no idea. When my cheques started to bounce every week, I knew it was time to depart. He knew it too. We both felt sad about what needed to happen.

It did not take long for me to land a job in the plush suede-lined walls of a pretentious office in North Sydney where I found myself in the unfamiliar world of arrogant actuaries. What a jump. Before my interview, I had no idea what an actuary was. So, I had to look up the word in the dictionary. The definition was “A person who compiles and analyses statistics and uses them to calculate insurance risks and premiums”. Well, didn't that sound fascinating?

Fortunately, I had the support of Tony. A kind and gentle giant, a strict Catholic and confirmed bachelor, he filled my need for validation by taking me out for dinner from time to time and spoiling me when I started my new job in North Sydney.

He had come into my life years before as the real estate agent who sold my home in Lindfield, and he'd been hanging around me for many months, often dropping in to see me unannounced. I guess, he kept close to me as he saw a listing in the future, knowing the time would come when I had to sell the house.

An ethical man, I trusted him, and he was one of the agents I had contacted back when I needed a valuation for the Family Law Court.

After my break-up with Brian, he became my confidante. I'd pour my heart out to him over a cuppa, and he'd sit shaking his head in disbelief.

I can't remember how long he was around for – he kept disappearing and reappearing between my various encounters with men and my marriage to Graeme. He'd just pop back into my life every now and then.

After we moved to West Pymble, I was near his office, so we spent more time together. He was a reliable friend, but no more than that. Although, he liked me – even fancied me, I think – I had no romantic feelings towards him, and to this day, I have no idea of his intentions.

One morning, shortly after I'd landed the new job at the actuarial firm, he'd dropped by for coffee. I was having a whinge about my outdated wardrobe. With no intent other than having a good a moan, I showed him a few of the better dresses that Graeme had bought me.

'You can't wear those outdated things to your new job,' Tony insisted. 'Come on, jump in the car. I'm taking you to the dress shop next to my office in Gordon. The owner will sort you out.' What this woman thought when we rocked up I'll never know.

'Do you like this one?' I'd ask Tony, swirling around in circles, feeling like a princess.

‘Yep, put that aside.’ The owner passed him a multi-coloured two-piece.

‘This will look great on Jan,’ she told him.

‘Wow, pack that one up too please.’ Tony grinned like the Cheshire cat, enjoying the performance, as he stood there approving or disapproving of one dress after another.

I ended up with three smart outfits. Beaming from ear to ear, I thanked my friend profusely as we wandered back to the car. He knew I could never afford a new wardrobe, and the lady in the shop was laughing all the way to the bank. Well not quite, but she did have a good morning's trading.

As I reflect on this, I've come to realise that people come and go throughout our lives. Some friends remain with us for a lifetime, some stay for a period and then disappear. Others simply serve their purpose and pass through. Tony was the latter. He was there when I needed him. He helped build up my confidence with insight and support. Then one day, I never saw him again.

As I ducked and dived my way through the mayhem at the actuarial firm each day, a young fellow just out of university became my new confidante. But, despite having his support, it didn't take me long to realise this was not the place for me. Three months into the job, I decided that it was time to move on.

Survival felt too hard amongst those stuck-up folk, whose self-importance dominated their personalities. They created an environment where everyone was on edge – unsure of their next move and petrified of a knife landing in their back.

Looking back on that experience in the business world, I can see that it gave me confidence and trust in my ability to deal with all these mad people. I even received accolades from the CEO. Maybe he'd had enough of them strutting around as though they owned the place too?

‘Do you think I need a change of direction?’ I asked my close friend Pat. At the time, she was the sales manager at a large cosmetic company. The role suited her.

She had been my confidante ever since I'd met her, and, though I sometimes found her strong personality challenging, I respected her opinion. We spent many weekends together, mulling over life, its meaning, and our part in its play.

‘Not a bad idea. Why not trying selling. It's not that hard, and you've got a great personality. Clients will warm to you. That's what selling is all about – people liking you and trusting you. Believe me, I've been in the game a long time.’

‘Um ... I'll give it some thought.’

Little did I realise as I took the quantum leap into the unknown abyss of selling, how Pat would influence so many of my future decisions.

Scouring the newspaper ads (there were no online jobsites in those days), I set about laying the groundwork for my new direction. *What the hell was I going to do? Two kids and not much money. I'd better get this right – sheez.*

My selling career launched when I landed a job on the commercial side of WC Penfolds. They were a very old and respected stationery company before Officeworks devoured them.

How I managed to look after Nicole and Mark, while dashing through the door at 6 pm every night is beyond my comprehension.

Considering my rejection syndrome, selling stationery filled me with fear. I'd have to psych myself up before I even rang up to make an appointment, let alone when it came time to present my deal to a new client.

‘Get on with it, girl,’ I'd tell myself. The sick feeling in my gut became part of my everyday experience, the precursor to walking into the office building. I'd battle my demons

every time I went out. My mission? To sell a computerised ordering system that made it easier for the admin girl (or the financial boss) to purchase and keep track of the necessities, so the company kept rolling along. I knew the system had great merits. But this didn't calm the butterflies in my tummy every time I presented my wares. I dragged myself around my designated area, day after day, detesting my job more and more. Telling myself I had no choice – I had a mortgage and a personal loan on our new Ford Laser to pay every month. So, I persisted with this crazy lifestyle. *You can't give up girl.*

On the plus side, my change of career had delivered us financial security. We all loved our new safe haven in West Pymble. Nicole and Mark had both settled at West Pymble Primary School, just up the road. Life was beginning to look good.

But the huge burden of stress that my new job placed on me was bigger than I could ever have imagined. It plagued me relentlessly as I struggled to hold our life together. I wasn't around much. My job was too demanding and exhausting.

'I had to ride home from school, change my clothes, and then ride to tennis,' Nicole reminds me.

'You poor little waif. I don't even remember that.'

As I reflect on it now, it was madness. driving across Sydney, from West Pymble to the head office in Penshurst, just to receive a trouncing down about the lack of sales, where I was going, and what I was doing next. *My best.* I used to think. *I'm doing my best.*

In the meantime, where was Mark whilst Nicole was peddling to tennis?

'Kim, a babysitter, used to come after school every day to look after us,' Nicole reminded me recently. I don't remember that bit. But they both managed to behave themselves (most of the time, I think).

Life, for them at least, was more relaxed. The boys would play in the bush nearby after school and run from the “old man” hiding in the bushes. They enjoyed the fun of tantalising this poor soul. I had no idea until years later.

Every night, I'd rush through the door like a whirlwind to start the next phase of life.

‘What are you doing?’

‘Have you done your schoolwork?’

‘What about your music practice?’

‘Help set the table.’

‘Mark, bring in the garbage bins.’ On it went.

Perhaps they dreaded Mum's arrival?

During those hectic days trying to stay ahead in the high-pressure world of sales, it was wonderful to see my parents' welcome faces when I came home every Tuesday night. The aroma of the roast chicken dinner wafted through the house as I staggered through the front door. The scrumptious dinner and apple crumble dessert landed on the table without me having to think about it. The roasted veggies were always crisp – YUM. The kids loved the cauliflower and white sauce (well they pretended they did), and they both loved the Cherry Ripe bars every week from Papa – an added bonus in their lives.

I was ever grateful for this weekly ritual, which meant that I could relax and actually enjoy my kids. Perhaps, it also fulfilled Mum and Dad's need to support me. Either way, it was a win for us all.

The sound of the tortured clarinet scales, as Dad sat with Nicole, another heaven-sent reprieve to my ears. Listening, encouraging, and enjoying the opportunity to support her practice. His presence lightened my load.

The instrument had been thrust into her hands at school in grade three with no consideration for my lack of knowledge of how to play it. I remain so grateful to this day for my father's support, and only wish I had been able to express my appreciation before he died. But I didn't have that kind of relationship with my dad. It was all subtle innuendos. It makes me sad as I reflect on his influence and the close relationship he had with Nicole. Perhaps she was his favourite? Maybe I shouldn't say that. Although, I think Mark knew it deep down, even though he soldiered on.

Dad's devotion helped Nicole to develop her love for music and her clarinet. I can still see his chest puffing out, a smile spreading across his face when we'd return from an eisteddfod or competition with glowing results and medals. The same pride exudes from every cell of my being now as I watch my grandchildren, Eline and Thomas, emulate their mother's drive and success with their musical pursuits.

I know Dad is responsible in part for Nicole's successful career as a professional clarinetist. He can't take all the glory, but I'm sure his influence and help in her early days of playing, inspired her to follow her passion.

During those long eleven years on my own, I made the decision to devote my life outside of work to my kids. Nicole was entering her teenage years and that's another story. Mark was growing up – he was the man of the house. Barely tall enough to see over the handlebars, he'd push the lawn mower every fortnight to keep the kikuyu under control. Sometimes his sister would help him. Meanwhile, I ran around like a mad woman trying to keep the show on the road.

When I reflect on those days, I smile and wonder how I kept going. Mothers just “do”. It's built into our psyche. Single mums act on automatic pilot most of their lives. I was no exception. Sometimes, I still find myself steering the ship at the ripe old age of seventy-five. Looking back, I still feel pangs of resentment about those tough years. But, as I've battled those

flames of insecurity, determined to extinguish the fire, my resilience became stronger, and my confidence grew.

Chapter 21

Holiday Reflections

After the debacle with Graeme, family escapes became an essential ingredient in our lives. Although I didn't have much money to splash around, I cherish fond memories of the many happy times spent with my children when they were young.

The NSW Sports and Recreation holidays gave us the opportunity to travel to different parts of the state where the kids could enjoy a variety of activities that I would never have been able to afford.

Sometimes, we'd go on our holidays on our own; other times another family would join us, so I had some adult company. Although the long drives on my own were exhausting, it was always worth the agony to see Nicole and Mark having fun with other kids of their age. The instructors helped them to develop all sorts of skills, while I kicked back and enjoyed my long-awaited respite.

One year, we found ourselves in Borambola in rural NSW. Another time, we drove north for hours to Lake Ainsworth where the kids swam in the tannin lake and had a ball. I loved the therapeutic qualities of the water and made my daily trek to the lake to luxuriate in its healing powers.

I laugh now as I remember our first holiday to Jindabyne on the edge of the Snowy Mountains. Early in the morning, the large lake beckoned us. Sailing was on the timetable.

After a few brief instructions, our little boat was gliding like an elegant swan across the lake with Nicole manipulating the rudder, and Mark and I manoeuvring the sails. Phew, we had managed a few hundred metres. We were in the middle of the lake now, and it was time to tack. *How?*

With sails flapping in the strong wind, we endeavoured to turn ourselves around, ducking our heads and just missing the boom. Before we knew what was happening, we were

off at tremendous speed. Out of control, we laughed and yelled to each other as we tried to avoid the other novices.

‘Slow down,’ Nicole screamed.

‘We’re fine,’ Mark yelled back, the wind blowing in his face and a grin from ear to ear.

I’m having a ball – I love the rush of adrenalin as the tiny yacht races across the water.

Then, out of the corner of my eye, I saw a grimacing face.

‘Pull on your sail, Mark.’ And, as he did, I pulled mine – too hard. Splash. We were all overboard.

‘Quick. Grab the side of the boat,’ I yelled. *What now?* I wondered, showing no sign of the desperation I felt. The distant sound of a motorboat racing to our rescue pounded an intense sense of relief in my head.

‘Hang onto the side of this boat when I come along side of you,’ Mat, the young instructor, called to us.

‘Okay. Ready Mark?’ He lifted Mark into the motorboat.

‘Right. Your turn now, Nicole. Hold tight until Mat pulls you onto the boat.’ I could see the fear in her eyes. ‘You’re fine darling.’ *Well, I hope she is.*

I pulled myself up the side of the vessel, scraping my body against the edge. *Whew, we’re safe.* Mark and I giggled nervously. Nicole sat stunned. Our rescuer was not amused. I’m not sure whether Nicole has ever ventured onto a sailing boat again.

There were so many great adventures on those camps. I realise now how lucky I was to be able to take the kids horse-riding and to sit around the campfire singing and joking with them –even when I was battling to make ends meet. The big plus for me was that I had adult company each night. Hopefully these memories have left a lasting impression on Nicole and Mark as they grew up with only their Mum holding their lives together.

As I reminisce about the train wrecks throughout the years, I delight in knowing that we also had many fun times together, despite my having to work my butt off to put a roof over their heads.

Together we met life's challenges, growing stronger and closer as the years passed. We knew, without a word being uttered, that our bond was strong, our love for each other deep.

Over the years, I built up my strength and developed my faith – both of which have supported me throughout my life. I accept this time in my life with gratitude. I was always there for Nicole and Mark as they grew up, and I still am.

I believe we all need tough lessons to grow and develop into our full potential. Perhaps these tough times had a profound influence on my children's achievements later in life? They learnt about the importance of cultivating resilience and a positive attitude toward the future.

Both Mark and Nicole have grown into successful adults with happy marriages and children of their own. Their success overwhelms me.

Nicole spent seventeen years in The Netherlands, playing classical clarinet in many orchestras and pursuing her love of Chamber Music in various ensembles. Now, she lives half an hour from me.

Playing in Australia had been her dream for many years. Although she did return home with some fear and trepidation as to whether she could fulfil her goal, she worked closely with the late Richard Gill and successfully established the Australian Romantic and Classical Orchestra. The orchestra is recognised as an integral part of Australia's musical landscape, and Nicole's life is flourishing. She works at her passion day and night with her long-time colleague and friend, Rachel. A great success story. I'm a proud mother.

Mark is also a high achiever, and his job has him travelling around the world. As a Global Sales Manager, his role not only sounds impressive but is also demanding and rewarding in equal measures. His hard work and dedication have given him the opportunity to extend his property portfolio. His mobile rings non-stop, but he takes it all in his stride, without any outward signs of stress. He is always grounded in the moment.

In the prime of his life and career, his wife and two children are his first love. And I'm proud of him too.

Chapter 22

The Other Side

Life took another unexpected turn when, out of the blue over lunch one day, my friend Thelma asked me ‘Want to go to the Spiritualist Church in Carlingford? I've been wanting to go ever since I came down here.’

Thelma's office was next door to my work in Lane Cove. She laboured away for a crook who sold some kind of guttering stuff. An aura of sadness kept her prisoner, preventing her from making the most of life's opportunities.

She lived in Sydney away from her husband who toiled on their farm in Tamworth to make ends meet. Every few weeks, she'd drive for hours to spend the weekend with him, returning exhausted to start work on the Monday morning. I wondered how a woman of her age maintained the routine. Her skinny body and the deep crevices on her face, revealed the years of stress and strain as she worked hard to pay for her son's flying lessons.

My curiosity and adventurous spirit never dulled. So, knowing nothing about spiritualist churches, I replied, ‘Why not. When's it on?’

‘First Wednesday night of every month. So, next week. Starts at 7:30.’

‘Okay, I'll try to organise a babysitter and let you know.’

The week flew by, and Thelma joined us for dinner before we set off. Feeling apprehensive, I followed her into the hall where lots of women, and the odd male, were milling around. Friendly faces greeted us as we took our seats and waited for the performance to ramp up.

Finally, Gloria, the medium, limped onto the tiny stage. I think she'd had polio as a child. Dressed in her finery with immaculate make-up, her face glowed with joy and enthusiasm. Gloria's charismatic demeanour consumed me. I was under her spell.

‘Let's sing “You light up my Life”,’ she announced, as the music bellowed out of the tape recorder at a hundred decibels. The vibe was intoxicating. It grew stronger as the night progressed. Next came, “One Day at a Time, Sweet Jesus” and on it went. The words of the songs vibrated in my head like a lifeline. I was hooked, and I wanted more. Our faces beamed like lighthouse beacons as we listened to Gloria winning over her devotees.

‘I'm seeing a woman in her forties, wearing a white frock with pink dots,’ she said, waving her hand in our direction. ‘She's telling me her name is Freda. She passed over in a fatal accident. She has a special message for her granddaughter.’

‘Yes, yes, that's me,’ a middle-aged woman yelled out, exuding excitement in her frantic attempt to hear the message.

‘She's telling me ...’ One message after another was delivered to the eager recipients – all of them grinning broadly. We sat in silence, hoping our turn would be next. But it would not be that night.

Every month, I'd sit on the edge of my seat waiting for Gloria to come to me with “a message from the other side”. Any snippet of advice or help, an acknowledgement from my grandmother or a deceased relative or anyone who could give me a glimpse of hope and the solace I so desperately needed.

On the odd occasion, she zeroed in on me with some cryptic communication. But I received nothing that would impact my life and relieve my misery. Nevertheless, Thelma and I trotted along. Hanging around after the meetings like two desperados, we would push our way through the masses to whoever we could grab. Trying to find someone who might just have that all important life-changing message for us.

One night, Mum decided she would join us. She was stressed about selling the family home in Gordon and optimistic she might get the answer she wanted. I knew she'd always believed in the psychic world, even though she was a devout Methodist.

‘Sure Mum, come along. Dad can look after the kids,’ I told her. ‘It’s fun, and you might even get a reading.’ She loved it. I can’t remember whether she found her answer, though she probably did. She was always canny. She didn’t join us again but was always happy to babysit while I trotted off for my fix.

Thelma and I were obsessed. She was fixated on rescuing her son who had lost a leg in a serious car accident, and I was searching for a new man. We became good friends. Two lost souls seeking answers, engrossed in finding an olive branch to cling to. Something to help us navigate through our tormented worlds.

These monthly meetings were my foray into the world of mediums and meditation. The beginning of my spiritual journey.

Although Ravenswood had been a Uniting Church school, I’d left the traditional Christian philosophy behind long ago. Mainstream religion did not feed my need for support and help. *How could I have found myself in such dire straits if there was a “loving God”?*

Now, I had found a place where people really cared. They opened their hearts with love for each other. The times of meditation and contemplation gave me a sense of empowerment – a will to live. I felt at home.

My search for answers took me to some strange places. One weekend, whilst the kids were with their father, I drove for what seemed forever to Blacktown in the Western Suburbs of Sydney to see a tarot reader by the name of Meg. I had never ventured that way alone before, and with the die-hards of society straddling many street corners, it was like a different world – one I wasn’t sure I needed to experience.

Determined as always, I pushed on and finally found Meg’s home. I sat nervously outside awaiting her appearance. A quietly spoken woman wearing a flowing kaftan, with masses of tangled ginger hair, Meg led me through a couple of rooms with stuff strewn over the floor, like a typhoon had just blown through, into her dingy little room. A simple table with

two chairs on either side, a dusty old tape recorder, and a pack of tarot cards greeted me. I sat myself down, knees jittering as I awaited her instructions. I had no idea what to expect.

We sat in silence, and I watched intently as Meg shuffled and cut the cards. Their vivid colours drew me in. Finally, she blessed them before she handed them over. As I shuffled the oversized cards, my chaotic mind darted from one thought to the next. *What will she tell me? Do I believe in this stuff?*

As it turned out, I was eating out of her hand from her opening statement.

She drew the King of Pentacles, which represents a dark-haired man with aspirations of wealth and so on. I was amazed. Her description of this card perfectly matched Graeme's description, especially when she told me he had just passed out of my life. Then as she started describing Brian, our marriage, and his departure in such detail that my jaw dropped in shock. *How did she know what he was like too?*

I hung off every word as she recounted every miniscule detail. A black card called “death” startled me. It was followed by “wheel of fortune” card.

‘All good,’ Meg assured me. ‘Your life is about to change in ways you cannot begin to imagine.’ An hour later, I felt like I was walking on air as I jumped into my car.

On reflection, my numerous visits to psychics gave me the hope I needed to get through those testing years. I hung off every word from every reading, gaining strength in the knowledge I was turning a corner and “a dark handsome man of medium build” was about to enter my life. Well, he never arrived. Plenty of others did, but none fitted my expectations.

Songs like Suzanna Prentice's “One Day at a Time” became my daily mantra. Blasting from the stereo, this song lifted my spirits, giving me the hope to carry on. A feeling of liberation permeated my whole being.

Meanwhile, my addiction blossomed, and I visited Spiritualist Churches whenever possible. I spent the weekends when I was alone chasing readings and meeting with like-minded people. I formed friendships – some of which lasted, while others turned out to be nothing more than ships passing in the night.

Having two small children meant I couldn't go out much, so I held a weekly meditation group in my home to satisfy my search for guidance. My new friends from the Blacktown Spiritualist Church would faithfully appear every Friday night, and my trusted friend Pat, who had been a wonderful source of support, also joined us.

At the time, she had left her second husband and was also struggling to find herself. She lived on acreage out near Dural and travelled all over Sydney with her job as a sales manager.

I truly found my place in this new world after I met John and Helen. A strange man, John gave me the creeps. He always had a vacant look on his face and a wry smile sweeping across his cheeks. He loved nothing more than to ramble on about some distant relative visiting our group with a message.

Having said all that, John was a respected medium, and his weekly guided meditations took us on journeys into an unknown world. Perhaps conjured up in our minds, it was always a peaceful place. I'd imagine there was someone waiting there to guide me – a person to give me the support I needed to handle my daily choices. After each meditation, John insisted that we do a psychometry session to develop our own psychic abilities. More help from the “other side”. I'd hang off every word.

When I think back now, I feel sorry for Nicole and Mark as they were sent to their bedrooms. ‘Time to go to sleep,’ I'd tell them before the flock arrived. They'd dutifully disappear so Mum could fulfil her need. Perhaps on some level, they realised that their lives were easier when I was peaceful and calm.

My journey of self-discovery began with these meetings and has continued, in many different forms, for the rest of my life. I developed as a medium, and this talent took me to many Spiritualist Churches around Sydney. Over time, I became highly regarded for my accurate messages.

As I think back to those times, I wonder what possessed me. *Did I really believe I was able to contact “the other side” or was it just my imagination?*

Standing on the platform at the Spiritualist Churches, I did seem to have a higher power speaking through me, and those who received my messages always validated my connection. To this day, I have no idea how it happened. *Was Auntie Rose really wearing a purple dotted dress, her face framed with long blond ringlets or was that what the lady wanted to hear?* All I knew at the time was that my gift was helping many poor souls who were like me when I started off down this path.

A few years into my life as a medium, I met a couple of girls from the Cronulla Spiritualist Church who were keen to support me. I went along with their suggestions. Entrepreneurial in their attitude towards promoting me, they organised large gatherings, some of which hosted over a hundred people.

The idea of standing up in front of all those people reminded me of the fateful day back in Roseville Public School when the headmaster approached me in the playground.

‘Jan, will you make the speech at the sixth-class school party please?’

‘Yes, Mr Watson,’ I replied, my heart thumping in my chest. I wondered how I had managed to be given such an onerous task.

‘And by the way, would you like to play the piano at your final Speech Day too?’

I can still feel my jelly-like legs as I made my way down the aisle of the auditorium to perform “Für Elise” before a large audience of parents and teachers.

With sweaty palms and fingers slipping from one key to the next, I staggered through my performance. I smile now as I remember my first and only solo piano performance with a sense of pride.

Some achievement for a little girl lost in the smoky haze most of her life. *Did I acknowledge my accomplishment back then? I wonder why not?*

When the time came to stand up in front of the crowds at the spiritualist meetings, I was grateful for those early experiences. And thankful too that, thanks to many excruciating experiences at Toast Masters years ago, I knew how to control the butterflies in my tummy.

I'd stand up full of confidence and deliver my wisdom to the masses. By then, I'd moved beyond the psychic world into the Unity Church with its metaphysical interpretation of the Bible. Catherine Ponder's books, her affirmations, and clear understanding of the Bible (not the Christian version I'd grown up with) had taken me in a new direction, one of my many tangents. All part of my desire to belong and tap into my inner power.

During the 1980s, I had decided to devote my life to finding my way out of the fog that had hung over me ever since Brian left. I spent many hours reflecting on my childhood, the influence of my parents, friends, and those who had passed in and out of my life. I knew this was an integral part of my healing. After all, in another one of my "bibles", *You Can Heal Your Life* by Louise Hayes, she emphasised the importance of releasing the past over and over again.

I'd finally extinguished the spot fires of trauma that had sprung up when Brian left. The time for deeper healing had arrived – learning to let go of my mother's apron strings.

Mum's belief system was based on assumptions – amongst them a firm conviction that "what other people thought" was of the utmost importance.

I remember her innuendos after Brian left.

‘So-and-so are so happy ...’

And my curt response. ‘How the heck do you know? Have you ever lifted the roof off their house? How do you know they are living in bliss?’

Now, I realize it was how she wanted her life to be. Dad was an angry man. I believe he was frustrated by life and remained so until the day he died. I will never forget the torment he went through during his last days as I sat by his bedside. It was like he was playing a tape in his mind, rerunning his life in gobble-de-gook. An indecipherable, incessant litany. Maybe he was trying to come to terms with his life before he departed? Hopefully, it gave him some solace as he battled to let go.

Mum longed to be loved and nurtured. Yes, to this day, I can hear her words ringing in my ears as I struggle to come to terms with the same search for acceptance and nurturing. The layers of my conditioning ran deep like festering wounds. To peel off each layer of the onion was a daunting task. My eyes watered as I battled to remove each one.

During my search for freedom, I recited my affirmations from Catherine Ponder’s book, *Healing Secrets of the Ages*. I decided that there was no need to confront Mum. She didn’t even know how I felt. Instead, I did things my way, maintaining and growing a healthy relationship with her until she passed away many years later. I feel so grateful to her for all the lessons I learnt. As she grew old, I became her support. My way to thank her for all she’d given me throughout my life both financially and physically. That was my journey toward emotional healing.

Through this process, I discovered a “new me”. A powerful woman who was supporting many people along their pathways. I didn’t need to know who they were, where they’d come from or where they were heading. I had a message which resonated with them. And that was my job throughout the 1980s.

Chapter 23

A Quantum Leap

While my professional career had blossomed from humble beginnings into a high-pressure sales role, flogging off stationery for WC Penfolds quickly lost its glamour – if it ever had any. A means to an end it may well have been, but after six months of bashing my head against a brick wall, it was time for this job to come to an end. Besides, I was sick and tired of driving to Penshurst every day.

Sadly, the next job that rolled around was not much better. I found myself working for a disorganised mob in Artarmon. The boss suffered from “little man syndrome”, and the job turned out to be a disaster.

The time had come for a round table conference with my career advisor. I rang Pat.

‘What the hell am I doing? I’m in a mess, can you come over this weekend when the kids are away?’

‘Yep, how about Saturday afternoon?’

‘Great, stay for dinner. I’ll conjure up something.’

Sitting at the dining room table, we tossed around all the possibilities for me to earn a decent living without all the stress. Having lost a breast two years after Brian departed, I knew that stress wasn’t the best thing for my health. Bear in mind, I had a mortgage, a car loan, and two children to educate.

‘I’ve got it,’ said Pat. ‘Since you really *are* psychic, why don’t you learn to read the tarot cards? Just look at how you’re always so accurate when we do psychometry every Tuesday with Norman.’

‘Gosh, do you reckon? I don’t know anything about tarot cards.’

‘I’ll ask Sonya to come over and give you a few hints. I’ve been going to her for years and she’s great.’

‘That's a big ask.’

‘We can always go over to her place if it doesn't suit. Leave it to me, Jan, I'll sort it out.’

Thoughts started bouncing once more. *How can I charge people when I'm a novice? Highway robbery? I'll have to use my back room, so I'll need to get rid of John. Where's he going to live?*

John had been our boarder for a couple of years. A lost soul, he'd broken away from his mother's aprons strings by moving into our home. He had his own tiny bathroom, spartan washing up facilities and lived like a hermit in a shambles. At times, when he'd open the door to give me his rent, the stench would overpower me.

‘Time to clean up,’ the landlady would admonish him. And he would – probably scared stiff that he'd have to vacate.

‘Start at your dining room table,’ Pat suggested the following week when she called in. ‘You'll need the extra income until you get established.’

She'd often drop in for dinner and a chat. I grimaced at the thought of banishing the kids to their bedrooms so that I could use the dining room. I knew Pat was right though, I had to crawl before I walked.

A couple of weeks later, Sonya sat across from me at my dining room table. I studied the symbology of the cards, while she explained their various meanings. My nerves rattled like the clanking lift when I was seventeen.

‘Have a go,’ she said. ‘Just say whatever you feel about the particular card. Trust yourself.’ Looking at the death card, I stammered my interpretation.

‘Yes, that's it,’ Sonya encouraged me. ‘A big change. The end of one chapter and the beginning of a new one. Nothing to do with death. Congratulations, Jan, you're going to be fine.’

Such confidence. Pat farewelled her friend in my driveway. I waved goodbye from my front door, then sat down on my lounge, staring into space. Pat returned and plonked herself opposite me.

‘Well, there you are. You can do it. I knew you could,’ she said while a luminous smile played at the corners of her mouth and her deep brown eyes beamed.

Like a stunned mullet, I sat in silence. *What the hell am I doing? Was I about to embark on a new career as a professional tarot card reader?*

I had no idea that afternoon where this decision would lead me. I just knew I had to change direction, and all signs seemed to indicate that this was the way forward.

I forced myself to place an advertisement in the *North Shore Times*. Then I waited for the phone to ring. And it did.

Some months later, after I had established a reputation and recommendations started to flow in, I approached John. I felt mean-spirited as we sat at the table on my back deck, but I broached the subject.

‘John, I’m sorry to tell you this, but you’ll have to find alternate accommodation. I need my room back.’

He sat in stunned silence for what seemed like an eternity before agreeing to find a new home.

‘No rush, John. Let’s say within the next month?’

‘Okay, Jan. I understand. You’ve been a great landlady.’

I stood up. ‘Thanks John.’

I fumigated the room, washed the bathroom out with bleach, and left the windows wide open for days. The hard work suppressed my fears, until I moved my new table and two chairs into the corner of the room. *Sheez, what was I doing?*

My dramatic leap into an unknown abyss had paid off. Revelling in my independence and ability to support so many lost souls, I sat day and night in my inner sanctum working my butt off. I had no personal investment in my messages. My only focus was to be of service.

A few memories linger from those days. Among them, I recall a long and dramatic night spent talking with a middle-aged woman. The following morning, she rang me.

‘How did you know my brother was going to be killed in a car accident last night?’ she cried down the line.

‘Oh dear, my deepest condolences to you and your family,’ I replied. ‘I only share what I feel.’ I knew I had never mentioned death, her brother, or even a car accident. That conversation taught me that people come to their own conclusions.

After counselling my distraught client for over half an hour, she thanked me profusely for my guidance and how it had helped her. I hung up. Sitting in silence in my safe space, I contemplated the huge responsibility I'd taken on.

‘I trust my intuition. That is all I can ever do,’ I told myself.

Another anecdote involved a well-dressed middle-aged lady with a foreign accent. She came to me insisting that I tell her where her lost piece of jewellery was hidden. Given that I had no idea, I sat in silence until a sense of knowingness came over me.

‘I suggest you search the white set of drawers in your second bedroom,’ I said. ‘In your home overseas, I mean.’

‘I live in a tiny village in Switzerland,’ she told me.

‘Oh right. Well, when you return home, have a look. Perhaps in the third drawer on the right.’

A few months later, I received a message from my client, exuberant – she'd found the family heirloom.

Appointments for readings continued to flow in. I even had to employ a “secretary”. Well not quite, mustn't get too carried away. My neighbour offered to answer my calls if I was happy to transfer my phone to hers when I was busy or going out. Not wanting to be under any obligation, I paid her for the favour. It also freed me up to have the weekly massages to keep the fluid in my right arm under control. These had become a ritual after the mastectomy, and I enjoyed the pampering, given that I didn't get any at home.

Chapter 24

Brave or Mad?

‘You're brave. You're amazing. Don't know how you keep going,’ my friends would tell me. But inside I knew that without my confidante, Pat, the likelihood of my falling apart was too close for comfort.

My life had settled down into an easy pattern. What gave me the most pleasure in this new lifestyle? I was home for the kids when they arrived back from school. My guilt over not being there for them was allayed.

My new role as a present and available mother gave me unending pleasure. Rather than relying on friends, neighbours or poor old Dad, to pick them up and drop them off, I was there to run them to their activities. Nicole tells me she felt very relieved at the time, given Papa was hitting the curb every time he made a left-hand turn. *Time to hand in your licence, Dad?* That's another story, and a tough gig when one faces losing one's independence.

To my amazement, my reputation for clarity and accuracy as a tarot reader spread far and wide. I trusted my instincts and said what came to mind, which seemed to resonate with the person sitting opposite me. Often, these people were desperate to find answers for their wretched lives and dilemmas. I never asked them what they were seeking. I just gave them whatever advice and help I could. And it worked.

Years passed, and I continued to work as a tarot reader as well as being a medium at various Spiritualist Churches. I thought I'd found my niche in life, but no ... Pat had another pearl of wisdom to share with me.

‘Why don't you expand your horizons?’ she asked.

‘Like what?’

‘Well, you could study something like counselling, hypnotherapy, anything that takes your fancy’.

‘Okay, I’ll ponder that idea for a while and see what I can come up with.’

A week later, Pat popped in after a disastrous day on the road. Her usual cheery demeanour gone.

‘What’s up?’ I asked as we sat down on the lounge.

‘Sometimes this job is too much. Talking about cosmetics with boring pharmacists who are only interesting in doling out pills. I’m done.’

‘Oh well, tomorrow’s another day. I’ll make you a cuppa.’

‘And what about you, dearie? What have you been up to?’

‘Oh, the usual. I’ve seen four people today. So, I’m feeling a bit drained.’

‘Mum, can you help me with my homework?’ A voice came from down the hallway.

‘Soon darling. Do your best for a while, and I’ll be there after Pat goes home.’

Two hours later, no dinner made, Pat and I were still trying to work out the possibilities of another career for me.

‘I’ve got it. I’ll come with you to Epping. I’ve found a School of Hypnotherapy there. I don’t want to be a hypnotherapist, but I’d be happy to keep you company. It’s a weekly session for ten weeks with a couple of weekends thrown in. What do you reckon?’

‘Um ... okay, why not?’

That night sealed my fate. We enrolled, and before I knew it, every Thursday night, Pat and I travelled to the school to learn our new skills. Thinking back on it now, it was fun as neither of us had any idea of how to hypnotise anyone. Thrown into the deep end with copious notes, demonstrations of how easy the process can be and lots of enthusiasm to succeed, I was off and running. I have to admit, I never used the spiral thrust into our hands that first night. Sessions on psychology, pharmacology, and client engagement, while all too brief, showed me the door to a new career opportunity, which I embraced with excitement.

After receiving my Diploma in Hypnotherapy, I set up shop in the rooms of a General Practitioner (GP) in the Imperial Arcade in Sydney's CBD. The doctor was happy to have me sharing the rent and his overheads. I soon learnt, running such a practice is a numbers game. As I recall he had to see about twenty patients to break even. Something ridiculous like that. So, we both benefitted: financial for him, numerous referrals for me.

Each week, I'd catch the train, carrying my leather briefcase and feeling terribly important. *Did I really know what I was doing? It's debatable in those early days.*

For many years, I wore both hats – tarot reader and hypnotherapist. Those who came for readings often ended up as hypnotherapy clients too. Thinking about those years, I realise I helped many people to confront their obstacles. I enjoyed the healing role. It gave me a purpose in life as a compassionate supporter of those in need.

Those years offered me the greatest opportunity for growth. The words “healer, heal thyself” echoed in my mind as I listened to the advice I was giving to others. *Perhaps, I was deflecting what I most needed to hear?*

I went on to work successfully with another GP near Gordon for many years. She had a variety of therapists sharing the rent at the time, and I received referrals from most of them. It worked well, given that I lived just ten minutes down the road.

I was delighted that I had taken that quantum leap. I was my own boss, in control of my own destiny. I'd left my morose world behind, embracing my new persona as a successful businesswoman.

Chapter 25

India

My journey into the Eastern Philosophies started in the mid 1980s when Kerry N entered into my life. Although he passed in and out briefly, he introduced me to deeper levels of meditation than I had experienced before.

I knew him by sight back when I was a schoolgirl hanging around Gordon Railway Station after school. I remember always trying to fit in with the movers and shakers in those days. He was infamous in his day for crashing parties, chatting up the girls, and drinking like a fish.

Our paths crossed again years later at a PWP party. It was two years after my mastectomy. A pap smear result had returned positive, and I was a week out from having a surgical procedure done on my cervix. *Here I go. Back on the merry-go-round again.*

I'd attended the party for something to do, I guess. *Maybe I was seeking the company of the opposite sex?* Regardless of my motivation, I ended up chatting to Kerry, who was now clean cut, though still tall and lanky. On this occasion, he presented a very different character from the one I'd known all those years before. We'd chatted about old times for the rest of that evening.

'Sorry, I won't be available for a week or so,' I told him when he invited me for a drink. 'I'm going into hospital on Tuesday.'

'Can I pop in to see you when you get home?'

'Yep, that would be great.' I thought it would be good to have a bit of company. After this new drama, I'd need some cheering up.

True to his word, he rang me and visited whilst Nicole and Mark were at school. I remember his words so clearly and believe his advice to be the only reason he entered my life.

‘You know, Jan, you're just not getting it right.’

‘What do you mean? I'm hanging in there against all odds.’

‘You need to learn to meditate properly. I follow an Indian Guru called Sai Baba. He's my strength and the guiding light in my life.’

‘Yes, I've heard of him. My friend Pat was following him for a while.’ I'd never felt the need to investigate her latest whim – until that moment.

Kerry taught me the fundamentals of meditation that went beyond the guided meditation that I'd been practising for years.

And so, my foray into Indian philosophy was instigated by someone I never dreamt would enter my life. He didn't stay long. We weren't attracted on a deeper level and blending his four children with mine didn't cut it, so he disappeared. It was a brief encounter, but one that would lead me down a very different path.

Kerry served his purpose. I'm eternally grateful to him.

While the meditation techniques stuck, Sai Baba just wasn't for me. I've never devoted myself to gurus – they simply didn't sit right with me.

In 1986, I met an interesting character, slight in stature with long silver hair and gentle blue eyes that suggested a sense of reverence and piety. A man of the cloth, he appeared to enjoy his calling. But more than that, he loved the money his brother was making at the Balmain markets because it funded his struggling church with its handful of parishioners.

He arrived on my doorstep unannounced one afternoon when the kids were at school. *I don't remember giving him my address. Maybe it slipped my mind at one of the meditation meetings I attended in his church?*

Whatever the case, he took my life in yet another unexpected direction when he introduced me to the Eastern Philosophies of Raja Yoga or Brahma Kumaris (as they were then known).

As a Congregational Minister and Raja Yoga devotee, he had a foot in both camps, which I found fascinating. His ministerial focus had apparently never been the mainstream Christian route.

In Raja Yoga practice, one experiences nothing but the bliss of the undisturbed, the natural state of calm, peace, contentment, and communion within. Their open eye meditation didn't turn me on. But the teachings did.

During numerous phone calls, the reverend encouraged me to attend his weekly meditation sessions. So, I kept trotting along to Balmain every week. A handful of men and women gathered in a tiny room upstairs in the main area of the church.

We'd sit in meditation (I had my eyes closed), and I would experience a profound sense of serenity. Here was the peace I'd been searching for all my life – a feeling that left me well-armed for the week ahead.

One night after Nicole and Mark were tucked up in bed, the phone rang. It was my new friend.

‘Hello Jan, have you got time to talk?’

‘Yes, of course. What's happening?’

‘I've just booked my flight to India, and I would like to take you with me to the celebration of *The Million Minutes of Peace*.’

I sat speechless on the other end of the phone.

‘Are you there?’

‘Oh yes. I don't know what to say. Let me think about it.’

‘I’d love you to come with me. It’s a wonderful opportunity to visit the Spiritual University of the Brahma Kumaris at Mt Abu in northern India. It’s a momentous occasion, and we’ll be sharing it with a group of journalists who’ve been involved with this project in Australia.’

‘I’ll give it some thought and get back to you. Thanks for asking me though,’ I stammered. We hung up. I sat next to the phone, perplexed by the notion of him asking *me*. I hadn’t known this man for long. I pondered his invitation.

I’d never heard about *The Million Minutes of Peace* project, so I did some research. I discovered that, in December 1985, three young Australians had been caught in a traffic jam whilst driving between Sydney and Canberra. Within the international Brahma Kumaris community at the time, there was a contest to develop a project for the United Nations International Year of Peace (1986). It needed to be something easy for people to do, something everyone could do (no matter what their religion – even if they were agnostic), something which was mindful and thoughtful and that those who contributed could feel happy to have been involved in. *The Million Minutes of Peace* appeal was born.

The Australian-based contest ran from mid-September to mid-October. People were asked to pledge minutes of time in meditation, positive thinking or prayer for peace and donate them to a “World Peace Bank”. The aim was to collect pledges of one million minutes from each participating country. However, the response exceeded all expectations. In just four weeks, some 1,231,975,713 minutes were collected from eighty-eight countries. The total was equal to some 2,344 years of peace. The pledge for peace was presented to United Nations Secretary General, Javier Perez de Cuellar, on 24th October 1986.

The day after I received the invite to go to India, I phoned Pat with my news.

‘What? That's amazing. Do you want to go?’

‘Well yes, I'd love to, but what about Nicole and Mark?’

‘I'll look after them for you. You can't miss this incredible opportunity. And he's going to pay for you?’

‘Yep, not sure why. Hope I won't be under any obligation. It's a bit scary.’

‘You can handle him – just go. India, how fantastic.’ Pat was always there for me, encouraging me, supporting me, so I took my wise friend's advice. Though, I wasn't sure how my children would feel having her strict discipline for ten days.

Plans for my first trip to India were hatched. As it turned out, it wouldn't be my last visit to this amazing country. With time at a premium, I broke the news to Nicole and Mark the next day. They were not exactly impressed by the idea. I tried not to worry too much about their reaction and focussed instead on my opportunity of a lifetime. I could never have afforded to travel to India.

Visa obtained, passport renewed, it was time to leave. Pat convinced me it was for the best that the kids didn't come to the airport to say our farewells. So, after a big hug and heaps of kisses, they left for school. My good friend drove me to the airport. I camouflaged my anxiety by chatting and laughing with her. On arrival, my friend the reverend greeted me, taking me under his wing and introducing me to our travel mates. These included Dianne Cilento and Kristin Williamson – to name just a few of the journalists.

Wonderful memories of that trip remain with me to this day. One of the most vivid was of the arrival at our hotel in the centre of Bombay (now known as Mumbai). All the women stood together in a room of our high-rise tourist hotel. Each one of us gobsmacked by what we saw from the window – endless rows of humpies built of old bits of corrugated iron with nothing but sheets of blue plastic wrapped around them to ensure a dry night for the inhabitants.

A myriad of pathways ran between these crude structures – some paved with rough stones, some merely made from packed dirt.

Judgement spewed from the mouths of the Western women looking down on the scene.

‘How can people live like this?’

‘Why don't they build something decent?’

‘Poor things, fancy having to live like that?’

I listened in silence. Then I simply replied, ‘Who are we to judge these people? They are probably happier than many of us living in our fancy houses back home.’ And I still believe this. Call it karma; call it whatever you like. We each have our own cross to bear.

Next day, I walked through that shanty town, talking to the kids playing in the dust, smiling at their mothers in their brightly coloured saris, and observing the men as they toiled to make ends meet. I remember one little boy offering me a comb to buy. He was so desperate to make a rupee. I didn't succumb.

That evening, we flew to Ahmedabad and travelled onto Mt Abu, a popular hill station. We bumped along in a rattly old bus beside the parched desert in Rajasthan, in the north-eastern part of India. I marvelled at everything I saw from the window – even the old man squatting on the side of the road. He didn't own a toilet. Cows wandered through the towns and villages, while scraggy wild dogs scrounged for their next meal. A different world unfolded before me. I sat for hours, mesmerised.

On our arrival, two middle-aged women with beautiful serene smiles, wearing white saris and long black plaits down their backs, welcomed us. Only women operated the Spiritual University – a unique concept in such a male dominated society.

I was shown to my room next to Diane Cilento. So excited to be sleeping beside a famous actress, I was blissfully unaware that during our time at Mt Abu, she would not utter one word to me. After settling into my basic accommodation of a single bed, a rail for my

clothes, and a rough bathroom, I made my way down to the orientation meeting where we would rub shoulders with participants from all around the world.

I found my faithful friend the reverend waiting for me at the door. He ushered me to my seat. The atmosphere was vibrant with everyone smiling from ear to ear. I immersed myself in the energy, allowing the peace to wash over me. We sat in meditation for half an hour, before receiving instructions about the programme that the Kumaris had mapped out for the next four days.

I didn't realise it then, but the busy schedule of meetings and talks, interspersed with meditation periods, would provide me with the perfect excuse to escape my lecherous companion's unwanted advances. Stressed and feeling guilty, I spent my time avoiding the man who had made my trip possible.

This time was supposed to be an opportunity for me to learn and share my thoughts and feelings, and I did not intend to have it compromised by his desire for me.

‘I can't come down to your room,’ I'd tell him. ‘I'm busy.’

‘Come when you can. I'll leave the door open.’ It was creepy.

You can leave it open as wide as you like, as long as you like – I won't be coming.

‘A few girls have asked me to join them on a short trip around the area,’ I told him over dinner on the last evening. Not a hint of his exploitations on his face, he agreed that I should go and discover this wonderful part of the world. Thinking back, I guess he thought he would be accompanying me.

When the meeting closed, I joined my new friends, excited about our few days together exploring the Golden Triangle before my flight back home. I tagged along, allowing them to set the itinerary as I knew nothing about Rajasthan.

Down the hill in the village, we boarded our bus. This one was a little more upmarket than the last. With Indian music blaring (grating to my ears) we set off on our overnight journey to Jaipur. I can't remember our accommodation, only our elephant ride to the Amber Fort – a principal tourist attraction in Jaipur.

Located high on a hill, the Amber Fort is known for its artistic styled elements with its large ramparts and series of gates and cobbled paths. Monkeys taunted us as our beast trudged up the hill. *How many times a day has this poor animal been up and down this hill?*

Like all Indian palaces, the luxurious interior of the famous Hawa Mahal (Palace of the Winds or The Palace of the Breeze) remains with me. We wandered around the building, which is built from red and pink sandstone. We marvelled at the ingenuity of the astronomical equipment from centuries ago. I don't remember much else, just the vivid pink exterior and a sweeping view over the city.

In Udaipur, we stayed in the Taj Lake Palace Hotel, which was full of grandeur. A young Prince Maharana Jagat Singh built this island pleasure palace on Lake Pichola in 1743 so he could reside there with his ladies. He called this palace Jag Niwas. Today, the majestic and magnificent Taj Lake Palace of Udaipur has been restored to its former pristine glory as a luxurious hotel. This spectacular building became world renowned when the James Bond film “Octopussy” was filmed there.

Shimmering waters, glorious palaces, and purple sunsets. There are few places more romantic than Udaipur. What a shame I wasn't with the man of my dreams. Being in this city was like travelling back in time to a bygone era – one of decadence and historical splendour. Unfortunately, I spent most of our time there in the bathroom or on my bed.

The previous day, we had taken a rushed six-hour taxi trip to Agra, stopping at Fatehpur Sikri along the way. On the way back to Jaipur, I ended up in the front seat, trying my best to communicate with the driver, while the three girls in the backseat chatted away.

‘Would you like a hot drink?’ he asked me, determined to have a break despite the girls wanting to keep going.

‘Yes,’ I replied, endeavouring to appease him and accept his hospitality. It never entered my mind, as I sipped my first cup of chai, that this wasn't a good idea. The girls had more sense and refused his offer.

After sitting on an upturned kerosene tin, sipping from a cup that had probably been washed in contaminated water, my bodily functions were severely disrupted.

The misery of rolling in agony on my bed for twenty-four hours at the beautiful palace island hotel, after that fateful cup of Chai, has left a deep-rooted memory. Unsurprisingly, I've never desired another cup of Chai to this day.

The trip to Fatehpur Sikri was well worth it though. This amazing UNESCO site, built between 1569 and 1585, was intended to be the joint capital with Agra. However, it was soon deserted because the water system could not support its residents. It remained untouched for over 400 years, and now its palaces are a reminder of the extravagance of the Mughals.

Fatehpur Sikri is also the best example of the culmination of Hindu and Muslim architecture in India. We only had time for a brief overview of this amazing place, before heading to Agra. I just remember the ornate buildings and the expansive view from its prominent position.

Agra and the Taj Mahal – what can I say? I've visited this magnificent monument twice, but my first impression left an indelible imprint on my psyche.

The Taj Mahal, “Crown of the Palace”, is an ivory-white marble mausoleum on the southern bank of the river Yamuna. It was commissioned in 1632 by the Mughal emperor Shah Jahan to house the tomb of his favourite wife Mumtaz Mahal. It also houses the tomb of Shah Jahan himself. The tomb is set in formal gardens bounded on three sides by a castellated wall.

The Taj Mahal was designated as a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1983. It is regarded as the jewel of Muslim art in India and is one of the universally admired masterpieces of the world's heritage. It is also recognised as the best example of Mughal architecture and a symbol of India's rich history.

Dumbfounded, I wandered around this magnificent building admiring the intricacy of the craftsmanship and the beauty of the tomb. The peace emanating from inside this remarkable edifice sent shivers down my spine.

Time being at a premium, it wasn't long before we were told to grab something to eat and jump into the cab for our ill-fated (at least for me) trip back to Jaipur.

My time in India fascinated me. I consider my trip to have been a special gift. The people so humble – eking out an existence on the rubbish dumps or rushing around as food dabbawallas and cleaning dabbawallas. Everyone had a role in life – to earn enough rupees to exist.

On each visit to India over the next forty years, I marvelled at this country's resilience. I feel so fortunate to have been able to experience their humility, which shines a light on western society's greed and attachment to their possessions. It never fails to stir up in me a profound sense of dissatisfaction with our way of life.

Another life-changing experience, this trip offered me lessons in acceptance, withholding judgement, and the gift of being humble.

Chapter 26

Realisation

As I reflect on all that's happened, sitting in my favourite chair on the covered deck, protected from the burning sun, I realise that my life has been a special gift for which I am ever grateful.

As the years have progressed, I've tapped into a source of strength and power that lies deep within my being.

In hindsight, I recognise that the decisions I made have played an important role in who I am today – whether it be on a physical, financial or spiritual level. And I ask myself whether I would ever have followed a signpost to my next destination without the dramas with which I was presented along the way.

But I had no maps to follow and none of us knows where our choices will lead. When I reached the crossroads, I simply chose to follow the unknown path that presented itself with faith in my heart. I had no concept of what lay ahead of me. All I did was to take one day at a time, welcoming each opportunity as a possibility for growth.

Risk-taking is an integral part of my nature, and it gave me opportunities to reach my full potential – at school, in my professional careers, and in my relationships –whilst battling and extinguishing the raging flames of anxiety and self-doubt.

Many of us struggle with our demons, trying to satisfy our needs through someone else, rather than taking responsibility ourselves. I was no exception.

Even after I returned home as a married woman in 1972, I still found myself trying to keep Mum happy. A goal never to be accomplished as her happiness didn't depend on me. This

realisation allowed me to heal my relationship with her and was one of the most important lessons I've learned as I travelled along my path.

When I sat at Mum's bedside holding her hand and reading passages from the Bible, while she slowly let go of her life force, I knew that despite some torturous times, our bond had never truly wavered. My unconditional love washed over her. I knew she'd done her best. I felt grateful that she was my mother.

My children are my true companions and confidantes, although I have to confess, sometimes it feels like even they are missing in action.

Family has always been my priority and still is. I've always been available to offer a helping hand to Nicole and Mark – to babysit, edit the latest newsletter, give advice (even when it's not requested), and the list goes on. I love being involved. I laugh when my son rings me and tells me his latest idea. *Isn't that what I suggested a few months ago and felt a stony silence at the other end of the phone?* My lips are sealed. I will always be there for them and my beloved grandchildren.

I cherish my close friends who continue to play an important role in my life. I value their input, support, and love. I'm always there to give back to them.

I'm coming to terms with the fact that I'm not a team player. It's been a hard lesson to learn given I've sought acceptance all my life. The old clichés: “a square peg in a round hole”, “third side of the triangle” or perhaps best of all, “two's company, three's a crowd” have been thematic throughout my life's journey. To this day, I live with these cymbals clanging in my ears – although now I've learned to accept that people are not always to my liking (and I guess neither am I to theirs). This insight helps me to accept some of the fickle interludes with folk I've met along the way.

My straightforward attitude seems to threaten some people – even when all I'm trying to do is to help and support them. I realise too, that I don't do well in large groups and making idle small chat is not my forte.

Still, I continue to observe my reactions, monitoring what comes out of my mouth. My soul searching never ends. I'm grateful for my sincere friends as I struggle to conquer my cynical attitude.

My role as saviour to others defines another part of my journey. It's my nature to help and support those around me, often attracting strangers who pour their hearts out to me, as I'm sitting on a park bench. *Have I got a message written across my forehead? Jan will listen.*

Now, it's time for me to stand back from other people's problems. I'll still be there to provide support where needed, but now I also know when it's time to leave that stage.

Some treacherous life experiences over the past fifty years have left deep scars, to which I apply the balm of self-love and self-acceptance. I strive to heal the wounds caused by people's hurtful remarks and stave off self-recrimination when my feelings of failure rear their ugly heads. I sometimes still need to dismiss Mum's voice in my head. But I have come to accept myself as a good person – loyal, sincere, and fun loving. These are all attributes of which I'm proud.

It's my ongoing duty to remind myself of who I am today – a stronger woman because I've battled the roaring fires throughout my life. I'm proud of my resilience.

I acknowledge that I've tried my best to live a positive and rewarding life. The choices I've made have not always provided me with the perfect solution, but they've played an important role on my journey.

Now, I embrace my life as a single woman, enjoying the joy and freedom my status brings me.

I believe we are all offered the keys that open doors to new opportunities in our lives, and it's up to each of us to be brave enough to unlock them and step into the unknown.

After half a century, wisdom rises like the phoenix from the ashes.