

Chapter 1

The river sparkled with all the promise an early spring brings. However, my heart didn't respond like it had in previous years. The crystal water seemed to be mocking me; as if it somehow knew I was trapped in one of my sludge days. Those long bleak days, shrouded in a thick dullness, that oozes into every crevice of my psyche.

Sludge days just happen. They're uninvited guests that slither in and take over. When they gain entry, they attach themselves to every compartment of my life. They seep into the corners of my mind; suffocating my emotions in their wake. These silent thieves rob me of the ability to rejoice in the simple things that give my non-sludge-days true meaning. These hideous days have the power to drain every shred of vibrant colour from the sky and bleach the early spring flowers that had burst excitedly into the world.

On sludge days I am a mechanical being; with legs of steel and the mind of a corrupted computer disk. My emotional sectors disappear. I get a Critical Error message when I try to reboot my feelings hard-drive. I knew I must do something urgently; before the recorded data of my life was erased.

Six years ago, Josh and I joined a philosophy group. We needed the stimulation of intelligent conversation and the challenge of new ideas. We were both terrified of becoming boring suburbanites. Not that we lived in the suburbs; but many of our friends did. Our married friends that is.

They had mortgages, four-wheel drives that had never crossed swollen rivers, skidded along muddy tracks, or had their pristine paintwork caked with the red dirt the Australian outback is famous for. Our suburban friends all had children, and their children had dogs, cats, goldfish or whatever. In those days, we had none of these. No children. No pets.

Josh and I lived in an inner-city apartment. We had busy lives and rapidly, upward-moving, careers that were high on the social-status ladder; with incomes to match. Life was good. We were the centre of the universe. We had reached the peak of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs graph.

We signed up for the philosophy group because the meetings were held in the city and the seven-thirty start fitted our time schedules perfectly. We rarely left our offices much before seven on weekdays anyway. A light meal was served by the venue provider; along with a couple of glasses of a not-too-bad champagne. Being in the group forced us to take a break from the pressure of work.

As the years rolled by, we made fewer trips into the suburbs, and the group members became our de facto friends. I knew these people would never be true friends, because genuine friendships grow out of shared, and diverse, experiences. I used to have a bookmark with a stereotypical garden image on it, and text that said, *'It takes a very long time to grow an old friend.'* I believe that, but I'm a professional and I've done the role-play workshops. In my job, it was impossible to escape the training programs because; they were a vital part of the terrain.

I value friendship. Most of the people I regard as genuine, real-deal friends, have been in my life for a long time. We share a history that in many cases includes our first day at kindergarten, broken arms from playground misadventure, mischievous skylarking, and long days spent tearing around the bushland on the outskirts of my hometown. These friends wiped away bitter tears; shed when a pet died and hearts were broken, or when a loved one moved away.

The unique fabric of these friendship included indelibly etched memories of family gatherings, which always involved too much food, carted in by hordes of relatives who pontificated, about how well my cousins and siblings were shaping up, and how they were making the transition from Neanderthal, to modern human being.

The aunts and uncles exchanged their opinions of me in loud voices. Their faces were always lined with concerned frowns. The way they carried on confused me greatly; because my outspoken, rapidly speaking relatives changed from Kissing-Machines to Good-Behaviour-Swat-Teams with amazing speed. And I really took offence when I was told, I was an amnesia-suffering imbecile, with a nanosecond-concentration span.

My mother should have named me Jane instead of Sam. Well actually, she didn't call me Sam, that was my friends' idea. They always thought Samantha was a bit goofy. I did too. Sam suits me well. A.A. Milne might help you understand why my mother would have been spot on if she'd called me Jane.

The Good Little Girl

By A. A. Milne

It's funny how often they say to me, 'Jane,
Have you been a good girl?
Have you been a good girl?
And when they have said it, they say it again,
Have you been a good girl?
Have you been a good girl?

I go to a party, I go out to tea
I go to an aunt for a week at the sea
I come back from school or from playing a game;
Wherever I come from, it's always the same:
Well? Have you been a good girl, Jane?

It's always the end of the loveliest day:
Have you been a good girl?
Have you been a good girl?
I went to the Zoo, and they waited to say:
Have you been a good girl?
Have you been a good girl?

Well, what did they think that I went there to do?
And why should I want to be bad at the Zoo?
And should I be likely to say if I had?
So that's why it's funny of Mummy and Dad,
This asking and asking, in case I was bad,
Well? Have you been a good girl, Jane?

When I have the courage, and the honesty, to admit to myself that I seriously neglect my friends, guilt grips my psyche and knots it like a Marlinspike Olympian.

While Josh and I torpedoed ourselves along the yellow-brick-road of success, I mentally packed my friends into a box marked '*Must Catch Up Soon*'. How pathetic is that? I think fondly about each one of my friends, and then, I just leave them hanging. I know I'm not going to make the effort to visit them anytime soon, so why can't I just be honest about it? How long does a catch-up phone call take? Five or ten minutes? Some friend, hey?

The philosophy group serves two main purposes. First, it gives Josh and me the opportunity to expand our brain with challenging ideas; which helps us retain the '*Interesting and Intelligent People*' title. We love that. Second, going to the group every two weeks creates an illusion of having real and meaningful interaction with our fellow human beings, that is based on caring and compassion. So there you have it. Two great reasons for belonging.

We slogged diligently through the background reading and made sure we watched the videos too. We took the preparation seriously.

Actually the reading was optional. The format for the sessions included two excellent lectures followed by a Q&A session and then thirty minutes of general discussion. The lectures were delivered by highly professional academics who made sure their stand-alone presentations were of a high standard, and inclusive of everyone; even the people who didn't do the reading.

But Josh and I always were well prepared. We slogged through all the prep work. We believe if you take something on, then it's essential to do it well. Moreover, we both like to be able to demonstrate that we know what we're talking about. The background reading allowed us to ask intelligent questions and that made people notice us.

So what's wrong with that? Who wants to be known as the couple who sit at the back and never contribute? There's no way I would have dared to raise

an issue during Q&A if I didn't have all the essential reading firmly planted in my brain.

Yes, I know. I've skipped over the guilt bit. Ok I admit it. Being part of the group allowed me to keep the lid firmly on the *Catch Up Box*, because I could rationalise that I was expanding my mind and helping the human race levitate to a higher sphere. Let's face it; the journey from our gaseous beginning has been a pretty slow and rather painful one. I like to think that I'm just doing my bit to help the evolutionary process along. I'll do what I can, to assist humanity's move along the Metazoa-Stairway, and one day children will thank me for my efforts. When today's young people reach my age, they will have strong foundations to build their own arguments on. Josh and I will have added another thick rung in the evolutionary ladder. Now that's got to be a good thing. You think?

Who am I kidding? This is utter rubbish. If I need proof I'm deluding myself, the sludge day has come to swamp my heart and mind. There comes a time in every life, when one must stop, look and listen. I was at the zebra crossing and I had to get to the other side.

Six years ago, and just six months after we joined the philosophy group, Josh and I were married in charming, sandstone, church out in the country. The reception was held at my uncle's rather grand estate. My relatives outnumbered Josh's but he didn't mind. He really loved all my crazy aunts, uncles and cousins and he actually thought I was a bit tough on them. When I complained that they interfered too much, he defended them, and said they loved me and that's why they worried about me so much. 'Well let them adopt a few hundred World Vision orphans and smother them with their excessive, over protective caring,' was my rather lame line of defence.

What's wrong with wanting to be left in peace to mess up my life in anyway I felt fit? Josh usually told me to grow up and show a little gratitude. He said I should be happy that so many people loved me and only wanted the best for me. He wins. I lose. Game over.

On our wedding night, Josh told me he would never ask me to give up my independence. He said he would not expect me to put my career on hold so that I could help him advance his. He was committed to the idea that our individual personal goals were of equal importance; and he assured me he'd do everything he could, to ensure I had every opportunity to keep pushing my professional goals in the right direction. He insisted that my personal and career goals were important. As important as his.

So what went wrong? When did the wheels fall off? How is it that Josh has rocketed forward and gone for one success to the next, while my career coughed, spluttered and finally stalled? Wide-eyed, but dry-eyed, I watched it slide slowly backwards into the abyss. That's when I gained a true understanding of what journalists mean when they say, *it's like watching a train wreck in slow motion*. One becomes paralysed, so instead of doing something to stop the carnage, one just stands and watches in passive silence.

It's a bit of a copout to just say the situation is complicated, but it is. And I'm just not sure I have what it takes, to face the reality that my career spiralled out of control and went big-time bust.

Why am I being such a Blondie here? That's easy. I just don't have the courage to deal with the truth right now. Lying is so much simpler. I can do simple. It's my speciality. Simple cooking, simple clothes, simple make-up, simple hairstyles, simple shoes, simple conversations with simple shop keepers, simple ... simple ... simple. OMG ... keep it simple, keep it light. Don't think. Don't question anything. You don't want to know anyway. Smile. Be co-operative ... be supportive ... be a good wife ... be a good girl Jane.

Chapter 2

“Come on Mummy. We’re going to be late for the game.” Tom yelled from the bottom of the stairs, “Jack’s mum left ages ago.”

Why was I not surprised to hear Claire was already on the way to the soccer field? Of course she would be. She’s the first edition Supermum. She’s the one God used as the model, for all other Supermums to emulate. Claire holds the Extreme-Supermum record for brilliance. And why not? If it can be done, Claire can do it ... and she can do it well.

Even if it can’t be done, Claire will give it a fair shot. Just to prove the thing really is mission impossible. Well, on this planet anyway.

Claire and her husband, Scott, coach the Under-Sevens. They wash and iron the jerseys too. I offered to help out, but they said I had enough to do looking after Tom and Josh. Claire and Scott have four children. Go figure.

During game breaks, Claire produces a stack of carefully sliced fruit for the little guys. When the game ends she whips out a king-sized jug of homemade lemonade and sticks a tiny black and white chequered flag in each glass. The boys wave the flags when they sing the club song. Oh God. Why does Claire do stuff like that?

The boys love Claire. Worship her in fact. She shares the same social status as God. If there was ever an election for the top job, I suspect Claire and God would end up forming a coalition and run the world together. They’d probably set up an office in Claire’s guestroom.

The fact is, I like Claire too. I don’t worship her, but I am in awe of her multi-tasking skills. In my former, big-time medical-research-life, I was often praised for my logic, attention to detail and my time management skills. But Claire wrote the textbooks for all these disciplines. She balances the demands of caring for the kids, with coaching the soccer team, supervising the

homework, cooking fabulous meals and cleaning the house until it sparkled like the Millennium Star diamond; all 203.04 carats of it.

If that wasn't enough, Claire has a garden to die for and she is always dressed like a model. Without a doubt Claire could run the country if the Prime Minister ever wants to take timeout. Her husband, Scott, adores her and behaves like a lovesick puppy when she's around. He treats her like royalty ... all the time. What a life.

A voice in my head screams, "Get with the program Sam. Get off your butt and take your son to soccer practice." Thank God the sludge is thinning a little, and the person who invades my body yells "Do it Sam".

It's not quite a scream, but only a scream-specialist would be able to detect the decibel variation. And they'd need highly sophisticated technology to register the difference.

Not that I really care about the authenticity of the scream. If it looks like a scream, and it sounds like a scream, then as far as I'm concerned, it is a bloody scream.

'Stop with the self-pity and show a little gratitude." My body-boarder harasses me.

My sludge-head is like an amphitheatre with orchestral quality acoustics, but I manage to break through and I'm in control again. I yell at Tom and tell him to get in the car immediately. He yells back to say he's been in the car for the past ten minutes. So we were a bit late for the game. Who cares?

I do. So does Tom. But he's a good sport and he forgives me. He knows about my sludge days. He understands that they make me a little crazy. At least I think he does.

Of course he does... as much as a six year old can possibly understand that when an adult joins a philosophy group, they study stuff like Pragmatism.

And this causes some individuals to struggle with the concept that an intrinsic connection exists between meaning and action.

Not all women struggle with this concept, but I sure as hell do. The fact that my husband has achieved outstanding success in his career is wonderful for him. But everything comes at a price. While his career grew and blossomed like a massive crab-apple tree, mine took a dive head first into the toilet.

I struggle with the fact that my career was less important than his, and therefore I should give it up. I struggle knowing that giving up my career provided the catalyst for my husband to achieve extraordinary success in his career. Can that be fair?

My head hurts and I know I must not give in to the pain. Drive woman ... drive. The light turns green. I take the left exit. I can't shake the question. My brain is clogged. Does God always need a sacrifice before he lets good things happen?

The game was exciting and Tom scored two goals. My twin personality went easy on me and I actually enjoyed being out with Claire and Scott. The boys were in fine spirits and life was good.

The dawn of another day and I discover the Sludge had completely taken over. I felt like I was living in a giant plastic funnel, but I made a huge effort and dragged myself out of the chair I was slumped in. I pulled on my trainers and forced myself to walk down to the river.

Sitting on the bank of the stream, to watch the water gurgle by, is one of my favourite past-times. I stared into the deepest part and saw the reflection of my life. I was thirty-three years old, not unattractive, reasonably intelligent, extremely honest, and although I neglected my friends, I was loyal and loving.

Sure I'd given up my career, but I'd gained so much more than a high status job. I was a mother, a wife, and my life was good. I had a lot to be grateful for.

I walked for about an hour and my head cleared. The gloom lifted. I went back to the house and pretty soon I was back on top of things again; the housework, the taxi driving, homework and all the other stuff that I had let slide for a few days. I was even cooking decent meals again and enjoying it. Tom was delighted to have his mother back on track.

God knows what he thinks of me during a sludge outbreak. He probably thinks I'm secretly draining the scotch bottle when he isn't looking. Anyway he stopped watching me like he expected me to become a missing person or something, and he became the relaxed child he should always be.

To give Tom a concrete sign that I was a normal human being again, I decided to prepare his favourite meal; chicken Parma Jana, although he insisted on calling it chickens-in-pyjamas.

While the meal was baking, and I felt completely in control of my emotions, I decided to make a couple of long overdue phone calls. 'Hi Mary. Have I called at a bad time?' Mary was my oldest, and one of my dearest, friends. She didn't count the days, weeks or months between phone calls. She was happy to hear from me, whenever I got around to it. Mary made me relax, and no matter what was going on in her life, she was always there for me.

'Sam?' Mary sounded excited. 'It's great to hear from you. She meant it. 'How are things?' she asked.

'Things are good. How are things with you? How's Charles?'

'Good. Charles is good.'

'So what's going on in your world?' Mary didn't answer straight away. I knew she was thinking. Mary is a thinker.

‘Sam, you don’t have to pretend to me. I can tell by your voice that you’re not good. Want to talk about it?’ Mary could read people. She had a knack. She didn’t have to see a person’s face to know how they were feeling. ‘Come on girlfriend. What’s up?’ I swallowed hard and blinked rapidly. I didn’t want to cry, but I did. ‘OK. Are you at home? I’ll be right over.’

I breathed, rubbed my right temple and said, ‘No, don’t do that. I just need to talk with you.’ Mary waited. ‘I know I should be happy Mayo, but I’m not. I know I should be grateful for my life; but I’m not’. There was a short silence. Then I sniffled and Mary made noises like she was soothing a baby or a puppy.

‘It’s Ok Sam. We’ll get through this.’ She paused, ‘Whatever it is.’ Another pause, ‘Sure you don’t want me to come over?’

‘I just need to talk Mayo. Do you have time to listen?’ I sniffed again. ‘Sorry to be a pain in the butt Mayo, but I’m a mess.’

‘I’ve got all the time in the world.’ Mary lied. She always had a heap of stuff going on, but I was relieved that she could be there for me. ‘So fire away. I’ll make a coffee while you talk.’

I took a deep breath. I could hear Mary walking around her kitchen. She knew how to make great coffee. ‘God I hardly know where to start.’ I gulped air again. “Do you ever feel as though life is leaving you behind?”

‘Often.’ Mary replied softly, ‘but I have a game I play and it doesn’t take me long to catch up again.’

‘A game? What sort of game?’

‘I go for a walk and I think of ten things I’m happy about. Ten things and I know I’m doing just fine.’ I could hear the smile in her voice.

‘What about ten things you’re unhappy about? Don’t you count them too?’

'Never. The ten happy things are usually so important that they completely cancel out anything I might be feeling unhappy about.' She sighed. 'You know Sam, I used to count the happy and the unhappy stuff, but I soon discovered that the unhappy stuff is just not that important.' She sighed again, 'Look I'm not trying to preach at you, so please don't get me wrong, I've just found that when I focus on the negative stuff it takes over and it swamps the good stuff. So I just focus on the good stuff now and it works.' She inhaled slowly, 'well it works for me anyway.' Silence again. This time I was doing the thinking. Was I only focusing on the bad stuff in my life? Maybe, but I just can't get to the good stuff with a pile of negative stuff in the way.

'I know what you mean Mayo, and I agree with you, but the negative stuff just pushes down on me and I can't seem to see past it.'

'Maybe I can help?'

'How?'

'Well we could start with you phoning me every day; to tell me ten great things that have happened during the past twenty-four hours. The more you focus on the good things the more they will push the bad things away.' I thought for a second. It sounded like it might work.

'Ok let's give it a go.' I paused then asked in a soft voice, 'Mayo, why do men get to do all the good stuff? And why do women have to sacrifice their dreams in the process?'

'Hey, girlfriend you've got it wrong.' I could tell she was angry. 'Men don't have all the fun Sam. They give up a lot too. They do it for their families and they don't moan about it. They just get on with it, and they don't spend their time whinging about how bad they feel.'

'Not all men.' I said lamely. 'Charles might just get on with it, but I know many men who bitch about their lives too.' Now I was getting angry. 'You are one of the lucky ones Mary.' I don't call her Mary very often; only when I'm introducing her to new people, or when I want her to know I'm more than a

little pissed off. Silly really, because she always knows when I was pissed off anyway. I don't have to resort to stupid mind games to show her my buttons have been pushed. 'Sorry Mayo, I'm just a bit uptight right now.'

"I know Sam.' She smiled. I could hear it in her voice. 'Look let me come over. We can go for a walk and I can give you a hug.' She pleaded. 'You sound like you could use a hug, so please don't say no.' I agreed. Mary said she'd be over in thirty minutes.

Chapter 3

Josh closed his laptop and walked to the glass doors. He watched Tom and his mate, Daniel, practicing their footwork in the backyard. 'Those two boys deserve to win the comp this year. They've worked so hard and their game has improved out of sight.' He turned back to look at me. I smiled in agreement. The thing I hate about competitive sports is that there is always a losing team. It doesn't matter how much the club talks up the code of playing the game for the love of the sport, it still hurts when you lose.

'How long will you be away?' I asked, making sure my tone is soft and not accusing. 'Should I pack your things now?' I smile again. 'I've ironed all your shirts and I picked up your suit from the cleaners yesterday.' I wipe the kitchen bench again. It gives me focus. 'Do you want me to order a cab, or will you drive and leave the car at the airport.' I give the bench another wipe. 'I could drive you if you like.'

Josh comes over and hugs me. 'I'll be away for seven days. I told you that last night.'

'Of course. I forgot.'

'I'll go up and pack now.' He tousled the top of my head like I'm a child. 'I'll call a cab. You have to take boys to school.'

'The boys?'

'Isn't Daniel staying over tonight?'

'No Deborah is coming to collect him at three.'

'Still, you will have Tom to take care of. I don't mind going by cab.' I put down the cloth and walk from the room. 'Thanks for doing the shirts and getting the suit.' He calls after me.

'It's my pleasure.' I reply without looking back. 'Can't have you looking like your wife doesn't know how to take care of you.'

'Come on Sam. It's only seven days.' Josh sounded frustrated. I stop on the bottom step and smile at him.

'I know. It's just that I will miss you.'

'And I will miss you too.'

Josh left at two-thirty; Deborah collected Daniel at three, and at three-thirty Claire phoned to invite Tom for a sleepover and barbeque. I almost said no, because I didn't want to be alone, but it's hard to say no to Claire. She covered all bases with comments like, 'I know it's a school night, but I'll make sure the boys are in bed early. And I'll do the school run in the morning. I'll pick Daniel up on the way.' Then she'd add 'Scott's going to give the boys a few new pointers to help them with their game.' Finally she brought out the big-guns, 'It will give you a bit of time to yourself Samantha, I know you don't get much ME time.' How dare she presume to know what I need. And what the hell is ME time anyway. Time spent at the hairdressers or having facials? It's my choice to live by the KISS principle. I hate going to the hairdressers. The dryers make my head itch and I've never been into sharing the latest gossip. Keep It Simple Stupid should be sign-written on every salon mirror.

As for facials, well it may surprise you to learn that I actually like my face. Furthermore, I inherited my mother's genes. My skin always looks healthy and even beauticians ask me what *product* I use to keep it in such great condition.

FACT: I don't believe in caking the face in expensive *product*, because a really good diet, regular nightly cleaning; with warm water and barley-soap, rinsed off with Aloe Vera, is the best way to retain youthful facial tissue.

My mother, grandmother, great-grandmother, and all the greats before them, used warm water and barley-soap to wash their face. The soap recipe was faithfully passed along the female lineage. Every daughter took the pledge to protect their facial tissue from artificial chemicals.

I hate myself for not being able to say no to Claire, but she actually did me a huge favour. I ended up having two hours of great ME time. And this made me feel like a new woman. But wait, I'm getting ahead of myself here.

After I packed Tom's gear, I walked him across the street and handed him over to Scott; who was waiting at the gate and smiling like he'd just been awarded the Father of the Year medal.

I declined the invitation to join him and Claire for a pre-barbeque wine. I thanked him for inviting Tom to stay over, and then I crouched down so I could make direct eye contact with my son.

I told Tom I hoped he had a really good time and that I love him. I did not tell him to be a good boy and I certainly did not remind him to mind his manners. Tom is a good kid and for a six year-old his table manners are pretty damn good.

I watched Tom trot off with Scott and then went back home. The phone was ringing madly and I managed to grab it before it cut out. It was Isaac. He lived up to the meaning of his Hebrew name; *he will laugh*. When Isaac laughed so did those around him.

'Hi ya Possum Girl. How ya doin'?' He always called me Possum Girl because when we were kids our father built a Flying-Fox between two trees so we could cross the river that meandered past the back of our property.

I loved that contraption and couldn't get enough of it. I nearly drove everyone crazy begging them to play with me. Possum Girl caught on pretty quickly. Even my Phys. Ed teacher called me Possum Girl during school gymnastics sessions; although over the years, Isaac had shortened it to PG.

'Isaac! How are you? Where are you?' Years fell away. I was a kid again and I wanted to play outside with my big brother.

'I'm at the airport. Just waiting for the shuttle bus to take me to the city.'

'Which airport. Which city?' I was yelling with excitement.

'Heathrow. I'm presenting a paper at the Royal Society tomorrow. I meant to phone you before I left Oz, but I was flat-out finishing the paper and sorting the travel arrangements.'

I burst into tears. I needed my Big Brother, but he was thousands of miles, and tomorrow he would be meeting up with all the clever people of the science world.

'Hey PG what's up?'

'Nothing BB. I'm fine.' I lied. 'I am so proud of you,' I managed to say through my tears. 'You know me. Always cry when I'm happy.'

I breathed deeply and managed to sound like a normal adult, instead of a broken-hearted child. 'How long will you be away?'

'A few weeks. The conference goes for three days, but then I'm going to Oxford for a couple of weeks.' he paused, 'I'm meeting up with a couple of old mates; the one's I've been collaborating with. We need some face-to-face time to validate our findings.' Isaac said softly; toning down the importance of his work. He was sensitive to the fact that I really miss my work as a medical researcher.

'We'll catch up as soon as you get back.' What else could I say? The words sounded hollow, but I meant it. I never put my brother in the Catch Up box.

I didn't feel hungry but I forced myself to eat a small spinach and feta salad, and washed it down with a small glass of red wine.

I channel-surfed for five minutes. I wasn't really expecting to find anything worth watching. My instincts were right.

The phone rang again. It was Sophie. She and Mary shared the best and closest friend position. Over the years Sophie had also evolved into the role of a true sister. Who cares about genetics? She and I were as close as if we had come from the same womb. Sophie was also a member of our philosophy group and she and I bounced philosophical questions off each other.

Sophie's questions rarely surprised me, but this one did. 'Consider this scenario' she said seriously. 'A married woman forms a strong friendship with a man who is not her husband. The husband does not like the friend. The friendship continues but it causes problems and the husband is constantly upset by his wife's friendship. Question: does the woman have an obligation to cut off from her friend and end the friendship?'

'You need to give me more background Sophie. The question is too abstract. Define problems.' I said gently. 'The woman's action must have a direct bearing on the problems. You know that. It's a case of cause and effect thing.'

Sophie didn't respond immediately. 'OK Let's bring it closer to home.' She said thoughtfully, 'Suppose I have a close friendship with a married man and his wife is not happy about our friendship. Let's say the friendship causes problems with the couple's marriage. Should I end the friendship? Or is the wife being immature and possessive, because she can't live with the fact her husband has a female friend?'

'Do you and your hypothetical friend have sex?'

'No. It's not that sort of friendship.'

'What sort of friendship is it?'

'It's an intellectual one. My hypothetical friend and I share ideas. We discuss big concepts. Explore big issues.' She paused, 'we don't think about, or discuss sex.' She laughed, 'Well not in the context of us having sex that is.'

'Does the wife have any male friends?'

'Shit I don't know. I'm not asking you to psychoanalyse the situation, I'm asking you if it is ethical for a wife to demand her husband stops being friends with another woman.'

'Well, no it isn't. No one has the right to tell anyone who they can be friends with.' I am certain of this. My voice is firm. 'But the female friend has an obligation to make sure she does not do anything that will make the wife feel insecure. These three people must be completely honest with each other. And they need to set boundaries. A wife is entitled to expect fidelity from her husband.' I pause, and then add, unless of course they agreed to have an open marriage from the very beginning.'

'Ok, then stir this into the mix. My hypothetical friend and I have been mates since forever. The wife only came into the picture after we left university. They dated for three years before they married. I went to the wedding but I have never been invited to their home. The wife made it clear she does not want her husband to continue his friendship with me.' Sophie sounded sad.

'Did you have a sexual relationship at any time?'

'I've already told you, no. We're mates for God's sake. We're not sex-buddies.' Her voice grew louder. 'Look I've got to go. Forget my hypothetical it's a no-brainer.'

‘Wait Sophie, I think this is an important issue. It is one we should discuss. Why don’t we put it up as a topic for the next meeting?’

‘No Sam. I don’t want to talk about it anymore. The philosophy sessions aren’t fucking group-therapy gatherings’ Sophie was getting pretty worked up about now, ‘I don’t need a bloody group hug.’ she yelled. Sophie mumbled goodbye and hug up. I felt like shit.

Josh phoned on Wednesday evening. It was nice chatting with him. I gave him an update on household activities, including the fact the quote for the new solar heating system was fifteen thousand dollars more than we had expected. ‘Bloody hell Sam. What are they going to do; line the roof with gold and use diamond reflectors?’ I laughed and reminded him he wanted the best and the best didn’t come at a bargain basement price.

Josh told me he had been thinking of buying another investment property and asked me what I thought of the idea. I told him I couldn’t give him an honest opinion because I didn’t have enough information.

I asked him to send me a link to the property and I’d let him know what I thought of the place. I have no idea if we can really afford another investment property, but Josh said we can. I guess he’s done his homework.

Josh believes we should build up a strong real estate portfolio as a retirement fund. To be perfectly honest I would be happy to have just built up our superannuation investments, but Josh likes the idea of having a property portfolio so I will just go along with what he wants.

After all he earns the money, so it’s only fair that he should make the primary decisions about how we spend it. I suppose building a strong property investment portfolio is a good idea. Doesn’t everyone say people can never go wrong with real estate? I’ll look at the property when Josh sends me the link, but I think I will just tell him to go for it. Why make waves? If he wants to do it, then it’s his call.

Chapter 4

Josh and I arrived early so instead of going straight to the meeting room we decided to have something to eat in the downstairs coffee shop. We ordered a spinach and pumpkin salad and a couple of sourdough bread rolls. The food was good and it was nice to have some time alone. We chatted and enjoyed each other's company.

I watched Josh while he waited at the counter to pay. There was something different about him. He looked more alive since his trip. There was a sparkle in his eyes that I hadn't seen for a long time. He had bought himself some new clothes while he was away. They were classy-casual and suited him well. I looked down at my dark cord trousers and made a mental note to smarten up a bit.

There was the usual fluffing when the others arrived; with a bit of air-kissing, vague greetings, and nods of acknowledgement from the more silent ones.

The convenor asked if we were all happy with the planned topics and we assured him we were. We settled back in our chairs and waited for the first speaker to step up to the microphone. This didn't happen. Instead, Sophie took centre stage and asked if we would indulge her because she had a question and she really needed someone to help her sort it out.

It took a moment to readjust the contents of our minds but then a chorus of 'sure Sophie' rippled through the group. The convenor said "That's what we do here. We ask and answer questions." This was a first for us all. None of us had ever had to make this sort of readjustment before.

We could tell from Sophie's face she was deeply distressed. No one had the heart to tell her to go through the normal process of emailing the question to the convenor so he could schedule it for general discussion.

In a clear voice Sophie asked the same question she had put to me when she phoned and within minutes she had everyone going. And I mean they were really red hot with this one.

Josh waited until most of the group members had given their opinion and he said with conviction. 'Regardless of the type of relationship, no one has the right to tell us who we can be friends with. Every individual has the right to choose his or her friends' he paused and then added, 'gender makes no difference. Friendship is a sacred thing and we must always respect that.' Josh had everyone's attention. 'Of course, as with everything, we must act with integrity and honesty in all our relationships and it is our responsibility to ensure we do no harm to others, whether physical or emotional.' Josh sat down but continued to maintain eye contact with Sophie.

Campbell, a young city lawyer, waited about minute before standing. He nodded at Josh and then turned his attention to Sophie. 'Your question is an interesting one because it follows on from what we were discussing a few weeks ago. You will remember we examined the ethics associated with making an oath.

For example, the oath university graduates make on their graduation day, isn't like saying 'abracadabra' and magically everyone is always ethical all of the time. The real test will be the thousands of decisions they go on to make in their careers.' Campbell nodded, 'I'm sure we can all relate to this. We study at university, graduate, move into employment and that's when we're really tested.' He paused. 'That's when we have to put our necks on the line for our values.'

He waited for everyone to take in what he had said. 'Well it's the same with personal relationships. When people marry they make a vow. But making a marriage vow is not a guarantee that a marriage will last. And yet most people who make a marriage vow actually believe in the power of making such an oath. A public commitment can be powerful. When we make the marriage vow, we only swear our sexual fidelity. We don't swear that we will give up all our friends, or that we will not make new ones.

Therefore if our marriage partner has a problem with any of our friends they have an ethical responsibility to extend the hand of friendship to the people we have befriended and to treat them with respect. Why? Because the marriage vow is also a declaration by each partner that they will act in good faith, and do everything possible to provide a stable and healthy emotional environment for each other.' Campbell sat down and said in closing, 'I rest my case.'

Jane clapped and said, 'I agree. Marriage is not about ownership. It is about mutual respect, honour and trust. People who cannot extend these to their partner, at all times, in all circumstances, should never take the marriage vow. They are too immature and should remain single until they have the self confidence to trust without reservation.

A promise is the most sacred of all human acts. We should never make a promise we do not intend to keep. The problem for most people who marry is that they marry for all the wrong reasons, i.e. the ones that are based on ego. Therefore they are not fit to make a sacred vow because they will always be driven by their own self interested aspirations. This of course begs the question, should anyone make a vow anyway?' Jane gasped for air and continued. 'A vow is not something to take lightly. It is not a casual promise that can be broken at will. Well it shouldn't be, but like so many words, society had dumbed down the meaning so people no longer take it seriously. The word has been casualised. Like love. People use the word all the time, but they rarely mean they love the person they are posturing to.' Janet shuddered. I got the feeling someone had postured to her and hurt her badly. She sat down without another word. The room was strangely silent.

A few people looked at their watches and looked as if they were going to leave. Campbell stood up again. 'Sorry Sophie. I don't think we've given you much to work with.'

Sophie picked up her handbag and slung it over her shoulder. She smiled. 'Actually you've given me a lot to work with Campbell.' She turned to look at the others, 'Thank you for sharing your ideas with me. I have the

answers I needed.’ She smiled again, ‘I am so sorry I messed up tonight’s meeting. I know it’s getting late and you may not have enough time to discuss the scheduled topic in much depth.’ She nodded to Josh and then said ‘I hope you don’t mind if I leave now. I have some serious thinking to do.’

Chapter 5

Josh went away again for work. The trip was for three weeks this time. He told me he would be travelling a lot over the next six months. He had won a lucrative contract with a huge pharmaceutical company. He would make a pile of cash during the five year contract period. I had been shocked when he first told me he was tendering for the work. Josh hates drug companies. He used to say they are money grabbing parasites that sucked the blood from healthy societies. The Western world’s heavy dependency on prescription drugs made Josh extremely angry. We both agreed that people’s obsession with body image, health and wellbeing was causing them to stuff their bodies with all sorts of horrible chemicals, and this did terrible damage to their immune system.

Josh and I shared the view that the overuse of pharmaceutical products will probably end up robbing the human body of its ability to fight even minor infections. We think the Superbugs will become even more resistant to modern medicine and this will lead to people fearing each other. Individuals will view their neighbours as their greatest survival threat. Living in germ-filtering bubbles will become the norm and isolation will be the most effective protection.

We also have strong attitudes to healthy eating and are concerned about that fact society is so hung up on variety and taste that people have forgotten that food should be selected for its nutritional value, energy supply and protein reconstruction ability. It should not be chosen for the pleasure kick we get when we stick it in our mouth.

I think Josh still believes this, but I can't be certain though. The thing I do know is that regardless of his beliefs, he is hell bent on building his property portfolio. He insists we need the cash, but I can't help asking myself if we really do. We already have more money than we need. We have a privileged life. Twenty times a day I ask myself if we're trading our values for the almighty dollar. I think we are.

Tom and I had our routine so life didn't change much when Josh was away. I was never really lonely, but I did miss our talks over dinner. That was the time of day we connected, shared ideas and caught up with each other's news. When Josh was away we talked on the phone; every day in fact, but somehow it just wasn't the same as chatting over a meal and a glass of nice red wine.

I hadn't seen or heard from Sophie since the philosophy meeting. I wanted to phone her but I was feeling uneasy about how our last call had ended. I mulled it over for a few hours and then decided I would phone to invite her for coffee. I told myself to start with an apology for upsetting her when we last spoke.

Sophie took ages to answer. She sounded terrible. I asked if she had a cold, but she assured me she was fine. My coffee invitation was declined. She said she was going in to the city and didn't know what time she would be home. I asked if she was going shopping. She said she was; shopping for a bloody good lawyer and a cheap divorce.

Wow. I didn't know what to say so I just said I hoped she was ok and I was here if she needed me. She didn't take me up on the offer; instead she said she had to go. She didn't even say she would get back to me.

It is a huge jolt to the system when a friend tells you they are going hunting for someone to do the legal stuff for a divorce. I spent the rest of the

day in a bit of a daze. While I was preparing dinner I told myself to wake up and get a grip. I wasn't the one getting a divorce.

Sure I felt sorry for Sophie and Steve, but I couldn't do anything to change the situation. If they wanted a divorce they would get one. No sense getting myself in a knot about it. I resolved to keep in touch with Sophie and to help her when she needed me. I was rationalising and I felt bad.

Sophie was inside my head. I kept asking myself when things had started to go badly for her and Steve. They always seemed so happy. Well when they were around other people anyway. Until Sophie phoned me I had no idea they were having problems. Suddenly I knew her hypothetical was in fact reality TV. Steve was having trouble accepting her male friend.

It wasn't about the wife at all. It was about the husband. He was acting up because Sophie and an old university friend, Daniel, were close. Steve was making her choose. Him or Daniel. Sophie wasn't having any of it. Shit, what would I do if I was in her shoes? Not that this was a realistic question. I didn't have a buddy like Sophie, so Josh didn't have to lay down the law and tell me to get rid of him or else. I felt a flush of anxiety but I couldn't put my finger on where it came from. I just knew something was wrong with my own life but I had no idea what.

It was a relief when Tom came crashing through the front door demanding food. Tom had the eating habits of a prana. Every day he took a bulging lunch box to school; the contents of which could easily feed a third-world family for three days. The box always came home empty and I knew Tom never binned a bread crust. He ran the one kilometre from school to home, blasted into the house as if he'd been fired by a rocket, and headed straight for the kitchen. He didn't raid the fridge. Why would he? I always had a platter of sandwiches, cheese and sliced fruit prepared and sitting on the bench. Does this mean I'm one of those over indulgent mothers? Probably. But what the hell, I like feeding people, as did my mother, and her mother before her, and so on infinitum.

After Tom scoffed the food and gulped down an OJ, he changed into his sports clothes and dashed down to the oval; to play a practice game of soccer or to shine his brilliance onto the little athletics sprint track. Fat was not something Tom had to worry about, all though I know many of his classmates fretted over the number that came up on their bathroom scales. At six and a half, what is going on in their lives? And what the hell are their mothers doing? Are they too bloody self-absorbed to notice their kids have an eating disorder? Or, are they the ones who caused it in the first place?

If anyone needed proof that western society is obsessed with body image they should talk with the children at Tom's school. They would come away convinced that the desired body image for children as young as six is to completely disregard all our natural physiology. These kids don't want any fat. They strive to remove the normal fat layer, which we know is essential for the storage and distribution of food and to assist with the temperature control of the body.

These kids just want skin. They expect it to be draped over their skeleton and then pulled so tight that it closely resembles the frozen chickens one finds the supermarket freezer. You know the ones. I think they're packed with a machine called a CryoVac. The name's not important, but the process is. Every atom of air is sucked from a plastic storage bag and vacuum sealed before any more air can sneak back in. Most of Tom's classmates look just like that. A pile of bones with only a thin layer of flesh covering them. Disgusting! Six and half year old children should look healthy. And they should eat well. So dotting parent or not, I feed my son.

Sophie called while I was doing the evening dishes. She sounded totally freaked out. I was stunned because Sophie is one completely together woman. Under normal circumstances, she had the ability to calm a frenzied crowd during a bomb blitz.

But not tonight. She sounded like she had just escaped from the local lunatic asylum. Screaming obscenities I haven't heard since I was fifteen;

when my 'wharfie' cousin Doug visited the family. My father said Doug was just showing off. He wanted us to know how grown up he was and prove he was a fully independent, beer swilling, foul mouthed male. Dad said he being driven by peer-pressure that demanded proof he'd left his adolescence behind. Yeah right.

'Please try to calm down Sophie.' I said lamely. 'I'll ask Claire to look after Tom. I can be at your place in twenty minutes. Is that ok?' I don't think Sophie heard what I said. Or if she did twenty minutes was too long for her to wait. She kept yelling. I managed to pick up a few key phrases: I'm going to kill the bastard. He has stripped fifty thousand dollars out of our mortgage account.

They stayed at the best hotel in Perth and he bought her dresses from a designer shop. He lied about going to a conference. All this was deciphered through screams, sobbing and fox-howling.

My pathetic responses included, 'oh God', 'how awful', 'oh Sophie, what can I say?' Well that was the question. What can one say that is meaningful and helpful when a friend is going through the shit Sophie was dealing with? Not much. Words are pretty useless and totally ineffective during these times.

Claire was charming and insisted Tom sleep over; again. I told her a friend had been rushed to hospital. Ok, so I lied. If you were standing on Claire's doorstep at eight o'clock at night, looking like you'd just had a ghastly supernatural encounter, you'd lie too. Trust me on this one.

I was at Sophie's in twenty-five minutes. She opened the door, but stared at me as if I was selling encyclopaedias. Her eyes were glassy. I'm pretty sure she had downed a full bottle of strong stuff. When I finally convinced her to let me in, the empty Johnny Walker bottle on the coffee table confirmed my suspicions.

Sophie offered me coffee and asked if I would like some toasted sandwiches. I assured her Tom and I had eaten a large meal before I came over. I suggested that she eat something herself; something a little more substantial than a toasted sandwich. She nodded. Then she sobbed.

I hugged her bathrobe draped body and crooned in her ear. We swayed to and fro for a few minutes and then I gently led her into the kitchen, sat her at the breakfast nook and poked around to find the things I needed to prepare something with a higher nutritious value than toasted bread.

Pretty soon I placed a Spanish omelette in front of her and sat on the other side of the table so I could study her full on. Sophie made no attempt to pick up the fork so I fed her. She opened her mouth like a tiny bird and she let me feed her without complaint.

The food helped clear her head and soon we were talking like normal adult women. The topic was a bit unusual. Problem solving divorce arrangements was new territory to us both, so we treated it like a risk mitigation exercise. When we generated an idea, or identified a task that should to be done, I used a whiteboard marker to write it on the fridge door. We had a plan in no time. In fact we were pretty impressed with the flow chart we developed. The box at the top of the tree contained the words: DISCOVERED STEVE IS HAVING AN AFFAIR.

An arrow pointed to a box below. This one said: see divorce lawyer. I studied all the boxes and told Sophie we had missed an important step in the process i.e. the box that said DISCUSS THE MATTER WITH STEVE.

Sophie assured me the Discuss with Steve box was totally redundant. She had all the information she needed. She suspected, she investigated, she confronted the other woman, and she had all the proof she needed. She had already seen the lawyer, which meant that there was only one more thing to do. End the marriage.

We agreed that the end goal would not be instantaneous. The whole divorce business is a long drawn out process. However, short-term arrangements needed to be made. Steve's stuff had to be packed up and delivered to his lover's apartment. Sophie's idea, not his. The house had to be listed with a selling agent; again Sophie's idea, not Steve's. The bank account would be frozen until after the settlement. The lawyer would take care of all the legal stuff, including the recovery of the funds Steve had withdrawn from the

joint account. When this was done the magistrate would declare the marriage over and stamp the divorce papers.

Sophie would then pack her clothes and personal effects. She would take her laptop, a few books and a couple of her favourite art works. She would arrange for a removalist to collect the few things she'd need to furnish a small apartment. The rest of the stuff she would just leave in the house and sell the lot as a package deal.

I told her to think carefully about this, because she might regret leaving behind her beautiful furniture. She was adamant that she would never regret selling off the things she and Steve had bought together. She said she wanted to leave behind everything that would remind her of the life they had shared.

Now I've never done the divorce thing, but something was telling me Sophie would regret selling her stuff. I think she would find breaking an emotional attachment to furniture a whole lot easier than forking out a substantial amount of money to replace it. Still this was her call.

I left around midnight; after sharing two bowls of chocolate ice-cream with Sophie. She assured me that she was ready to be alone and wanted to test her courage. I hugged her and felt a combination of emotions; sadness for the fact she had to deal with this shit, but on the other hand I was immensely proud that she could face her fears and take control of her life. Earlier in the evening Sophie said she knew Steve was having an affair but she had been denying it to herself for more than a year. She said she just didn't want to know the truth. She hadn't been ready to face the consequences of challenging Steve and having proof of the affair. Sophie she said had been too weak to deal with the avalanche of events that would follow once Steve came clean. She was scared to admit what her gut feelings were telling her.

Sophie had been lying on the coach, sipping her wine, when she told me this. She looked at me, gave a half smile and then said, 'You know Sam a wife always knows when their husband is cheating on them.' I said nothing and just nodded. 'They know because they notice subtle changes. Their husband buys a few new garments for his wardrobe; smarter stuff than he usually wears. He

changes his after-shave, or he has his hair styled.' She had taken another sip of wine and closed her eyes as if she was recreating an image in her mind. 'Steve never shopped for clothes. He hated department stores. I bought every bloody thing he ever wore.'

She nodded again. 'Yes, wives always know. But they don't want to confront the truth; so they convince themselves that nothing has changed and they kid themselves they are happy that their husbands have finally relieved them of the job of buying their clothes.'

Wives know Sam. But wives are scared of the train wreck that will follow once they are forced to open their eyes and admit the truth.' Sophie cried softly after she said this. I think that was all she had the energy for, she had cried herself out and the well was almost dry.