

A Gentle kind of Courage

The Memoirs of
Elizabeth Lara



Words by Brooke Turnbull

"To be a vessel of love — empowering others to find harmony within themselves so that peace can ripple outward into the world"

— Elizabeth

This book is dedicated to those who have held me, believed in me, and allowed me to pour love onto them without reservation.

To Alex, my partner — my strong, steady, and unwavering love.

To Alatheia, Jacob, and Naomi — you are the greatest expression of love I have ever known.

To my brother Miguel and my sister Sara — we walked through the fire together, and I love you more than words could ever hold.

And to Robert Alexander — Bob — whose belief in my story made this book possible. Thank you for seeing something worth sharing, and for helping me bring it into the world.

With all of my love, Elizabeth

I was born in 1979, the youngest of three children. In Colombia at that time, records were not always kept carefully, especially in smaller communities, and so even the details of my own beginning feel uncertain. I don't know for certain whether I was born in the city or in the small village where I would spend the earliest years of my childhood. It is strange, sometimes, to think that something as fundamental as the place you entered the world could be unclear. But in many ways, that uncertainty mirrors the rest of my early life. Much of my childhood existed in a blur of instability, where the ground beneath us never felt quite steady.

My earliest clear memory comes from when I was three years old. An earthquake struck our village in the early hours of the morning. Even now, when I think back on it, the memory does not unfold like a normal story. It comes in flashes—sharp fragments of sound and movement. The violent shaking beneath us. The cracking of wood and stone. The distant barking of dogs. The screams of people outside as they ran from their homes toward the grey light of dawn, seeking sky above them and solid earth beneath their feet.

I remember the feeling more than anything: the deep, primal terror that something enormous and uncontrollable was happening, something far bigger than the small child I was.

Looking back now, I often think about that moment as a kind of metaphor for the life we were living inside our home. From the outside, my father wanted the world to believe that our family was strong, stable, respectable. But beneath the surface, the foundations were already fractured. The earthquake simply made visible what we were already living through in quieter, more hidden ways.

That night, my father was not home. That small detail would change everything.

Because he was away, my brother had been allowed to sleep in my mother's bed instead of in the bunk bed where he normally slept. It was a small comfort for him, something my mother occasionally allowed when my father wasn't there to enforce his rigid rules.

When the earthquake struck, the house began to shudder violently. Walls groaned. Furniture slid across the floor. The roof above us cracked and splintered as the ground lurched beneath the house.

Then it happened.

Part of the roof collapsed, sending debris crashing down into the bedroom. Among the falling rubble was a massive concrete slab that crashed directly onto the bunk bed.

Right where my brother should have been sleeping.

Even as a toddler, I understood something about that moment. Not the full reality of it, but enough to know that something terrible had almost happened. That we had come dangerously close to losing him.

The images from that night live in my memory like broken pieces of film: my mother screaming, her voice high and panicked; my brother and sister running toward me; the choking dust in the air as parts of the ceiling collapsed around us. I remember being lifted, carried, rushed outside into the open sky where neighbors had already gathered in the street, many of them crying, some praying aloud.

The whole village seemed to be awake, standing barefoot in the first light of morning, wrapped in blankets or nightclothes, staring at the damaged homes around us.

For a child, the world suddenly felt unpredictable and frightening. The place that should have been safest, our home, had literally fallen apart.

Our house was badly damaged and unsafe to live in, so we were moved into emergency accommodation while repairs were made. I remember the strange unfamiliarity of those temporary spaces. The feeling of not belonging anywhere. Of waiting for normal life to return, though I wasn't old enough to understand that normal life for us had never truly been safe to begin with.

If our earliest memories shape the way we see the world, then perhaps it makes sense that mine began with fear and instability. My childhood was filled with suffering that extended far beyond that single natural disaster.

The real danger in our lives was not the shifting earth beneath our house, but the man who lived inside it with us.

My father was not a physically large man, but he carried a presence that dominated every inch of our lives. His authority was absolute, and it was enforced through fear. The air in our home was always tense, as though everyone was waiting for something to break.

His anger could appear without warning. A small mistake, a misunderstood comment, even a look he didn't like could trigger a storm. When those storms came, they came with shouting, threats, and violence. My mother, my brother, and I were all targets of his physical and verbal abuse.

As children, we learned to read his moods with frightening precision. We listened carefully to the sound of his footsteps when he entered the house. We watched the set of his jaw, the tightness in his shoulders, the way his face would close into something frightening — brows drawn down hard, eyes burning with a fury that we had no words for as children, only the urgent, wordless need to disappear. We tried

to make ourselves smaller, quieter, less noticeable, hoping that if we stayed invisible enough we might avoid becoming the focus of his rage.

But the worst of his cruelty was reserved for my sister, Sara.

Looking back now with the understanding of an adult, I believe my father suffered from a severe and untreated mental illness. At the time, however, there was no explanation offered to us, no intervention, no protection.

Instead, we lived inside the reality he created.

My father developed a disturbing and obsessive belief that Sara was the reincarnation of a woman he had once loved, an ex-girlfriend who had died years before. In his mind, my sister was not his child. She was someone returned to him, someone he believed belonged to him in a deeply twisted way.

Sara was only nine years old when the abuse began.

It is almost impossible to write those words without feeling the weight of them even now.

Night after night, he treated her as though she were his wife, subjecting her to sexual abuse that no child should ever experience. What happened behind the closed doors of our home was something none of us had the power to stop.

My brother tried.

He was still just a boy himself, but he carried a fierce protectiveness toward all of us, toward my mother, toward Sara, toward me. He confronted our father whenever he could, placing himself in harm's way in an attempt to shield the rest of us.

But standing up to my father only brought more cruelty down upon him.

My father rejected him completely, telling him he was no son of his. Those words cut deeply, but they never broke my brother's loyalty to us. He continued trying, even when it meant enduring punishment himself.

For children growing up inside that environment, survival often meant silence. We learned to keep secrets, to hide our pain from the outside world. To pretend, when necessary, that everything was normal.

But within that darkness, something remarkable also grew between the three of us.

Despite the fear, despite the violence, despite the way our father tried to divide and control us, my siblings and I developed a bond that was unbreakable. We became each other's allies, protectors, and witnesses. We understood one another in ways that required no explanation.

We knew what we had lived through.

Today, our lives have taken us far from that small village in Colombia. We now live on three different continents, oceans and time zones separating us. Our paths have carried us into entirely different worlds.

And yet the bond between us remains as strong as ever.

The distance has never weakened it. If anything, it has made it clearer just how extraordinary it is that we still have one another.

There are six years between my sister and me, and five years between my brother and me. As children, those age differences sometimes felt large. But now, they seem insignificant compared to everything that ties us together.

We share a history that shaped us in ways few people can truly understand. A childhood marked by terror and survival. But also by loyalty, resilience, and love. What binds us together is not simply blood.

It is the knowledge that we endured something together, and that through it all, we never stopped protecting one another.

No matter how far apart we are in the world, that promise remains unbroken.

My father was relentlessly violent, but his cruelty did not always arrive in the form of fists or shouting. Often, it came wrapped in manipulation so calculated that, as children, we could not separate truth from blame. He had a way of turning every moment of chaos back onto us, as though the suffering in our home was something we had created.

When I was around 9 years old, I witnessed something that would stay with me for the rest of my life.

My father took a pair of scissors and pressed the blades against the skin of his arm. I remember standing there, frozen, unable to understand what I was seeing. Slowly, deliberately, he sliced into his own veins just enough to break the skin. A thin rivulet of blood began to run down his arm spreading slowly into a puddle on the handwoven rug — a lake, to my small eyes, and I was drowning in it. The room seemed to stop breathing.

He watched us as it happened, watched our horror, our confusion, our fear.

Then he began slamming his head against the wall, over and over, the dull thud of bone against plaster echoing through the house.

“This is your fault,” he shouted. “My life is misery because of you.”

He told us he wanted to die because we were such terrible children.

At ~~six~~-**nine** years old, those words landed with enormous weight. Children believe what they are told, especially when the person telling them is their father. In that moment, I remember feeling something terrible and confusing.

The writhing fear that maybe he was right. That maybe we really were the cause of all the darkness in his life.

The image of him standing there with blood running down his arm has never left me. Neither has the sight of the bruises that so often covered us — though the deepest ones never showed on the surface. Those were left by words, by blame, by the quiet but crushing weight of being made to feel responsible for a man's suffering.

Violence has a way of carving itself into memory. It shapes how you understand love, safety, and family long before you are old enough to question those ideas. Looking back now, I know that those moments, those scenes of blood, shouting, and fear, helped shape the person I would become. But at the time, they simply felt like the normal rhythm of our lives.

If my father filled our home with fear, my mother filled it with something entirely different.

Despite everything she endured, she thought first of others.

My mother worked in a role that today would likely be called social work. She travelled between villages and towns, meeting with women who were living in situations not unlike her own. Her work was to encourage them, support them, and equip them with practical skills — teaching them to make crafts, to prepare healthy food, to use their own tenacity to build something for themselves. For some, that meant a small income. For others, it meant a quiet but meaningful reclaiming of dignity within their daily lives.

It was extraordinary, when I look back on it now. My mother, living in the middle of her own nightmare, spent her days helping other women find their footing within theirs.

She believed fiercely in the strength of women. She believed that even those who felt powerless could find a way to stand again. And she poured her heart into that

belief. She travelled long distances, sometimes through remote villages, speaking with women who had been told their entire lives that they had had nothing to offer and nowhere to turn.

My mother told them something different.

She told them- their hands held value. That a meal made with care, a craft shaped with patience, a skill passed on to a child — these things mattered. That within the life they already had, there was the seed of something better, and that their own tenacity was enough to grow it.

But carrying the hope of so many women, alongside the weight of her own, came at a terrible cost.

Her mind was constantly burdened with worry about our family. She worried about my sister, about the horrors my father was inflicting on her. She worried about my brother and the danger he put himself in trying to protect us. She worried about me, the youngest, absorbing more than a child should ever see.

And she worried about herself.

She tried to seek help from my father's family. She believed, perhaps naively, that if they understood what was happening inside our home they would intervene. She hoped they might do for her what she was doing for so many other women.

But they refused.

They turned her away and told her something that would echo painfully through our lives: protect his reputation at all costs.

To my father's family, reputation was everything. Image mattered more than truth. What happened inside the walls of our house was not to be spoken about, not to be acknowledged, not even to be hinted at.

The walls of that house were not allowed to whisper their secrets.

And so my mother carried those secrets alone.

The weight of them slowly crushed her.

When I was eight years old, my mother was diagnosed with a brain tumour.

I remember the word “tumour” floating through conversations in hushed voices, though I did not fully understand what it meant. I only knew that it was something frightening, something serious enough that my mother had to travel to the city of Popayán and sometimes the even bigger city of Cali to receive treatment.

Popayán and Cali were far from our village, and every trip there felt like entering another world.

The doctors operated, but they were unable to remove the entire tumour. It remained inside her brain like an unwelcome shadow, something that would continue to threaten her life.

Eventually, it became clear that travelling back and forth was no longer possible. My mother needed to be closer to the hospital, closer to the specialists who were trying to save her life.

So we moved.

Leaving the village behind, we relocated to the city of Popayán so she could receive the treatment she desperately needed. For my father, the move made practical sense, the city brought him closer to his work, sparing him the long daily journey he had made for years. In that way, at least, it suited him.

But if we had hoped that a new place might bring a new beginning, we were wrong.

His anger did not stay behind in the village. It packed itself quietly alongside everything else and followed us into the city, continuing to shape our home just as it always had.

Popayán itself was beautiful.

I remember the white buildings glowing in the sunlight, their Spanish colonial architecture giving the city an elegance that felt almost dreamlike. The streets carried a sense of history, with balconies and archways that seemed pulled from another century.

To an outsider, it must have looked like a wonderful place to live.

But beauty can hide many things.

Behind the doors of our home, the same secrets remained. The same fear. The same violence. The same desperate effort to survive.

This was not a move for adventure or opportunity. It was a move for survival. We were trying to survive my father's abuse. And we were trying to survive my mother's illness.

When my brother turned fourteen, my father finally acted on the resentment he had long carried toward him. My brother's protective nature had always threatened him. He hated the closeness between my brother, my sister, and my mother.

One day, in a moment of rage, my father threw my brother out of the house.

He forced him onto the streets of the city and refused to let him return.

Fourteen years old. Still a child.

I remember the fear that settled into my chest when he left. The uncertainty of not knowing where he would go, whether he would be safe, whether I would ever see him again. The city suddenly felt enormous and dangerous.

My brother had to rely on the kindness of friends and distant relatives, moving between homes, finding whatever refuge he could. It broke something in me to know that he was out there alone, navigating the world far too early.

He had spent his childhood trying to protect us. Now he had to protect himself. Meanwhile, my mother continued her own battle.

Between the ages of nine and twelve, hospitals became a regular part of my life. I visited her again and again as doctors tried different treatments, monitoring the tumour that continued to threaten her.

When I was twelve, she underwent a second operation.

This time, it was meant to remove what remained of the tumour. It was supposed to give her another chance at life.

But it was an operation from which she would never fully recover.

I remember visiting her in the hospital afterward. She was in intensive care, her body fragile and motionless beneath the white sheets. Her face looked peaceful in sleep, but the machinery surrounding her told another story.

There was a tube draining from her head.

Attached to that tube was a surgical glove that the doctors had fashioned into a crude drainage device. As fluid left her body, the glove would slowly inflate, filling with dark blood before deflating again as it drained away.

The rhythmic inflation and deflation of that glove haunted me.

It was a grotesque, mechanical reminder of how hard her body was fighting to survive. The soft sound of the glove filling and emptying echoed in my mind for years afterward, appearing in nightmares long after I had left that hospital room.

I remember standing there, horrified.

My mother did not deserve this. She did not deserve to lie in that hospital bed, her body broken, that grotesque glove rising and falling beside her like a slow, terrible wave goodbye.

Eventually, she did come home.

But she was never the same.

After the surgery, my mother was bedridden for the rest of her life. The tumour and the operation had robbed her of the mobility she once had. The woman who had travelled from village to village helping others stand on their own feet could now barely move herself.

She lay in bed, her body weakened, her spirit still fighting but trapped within the limits of what illness had done to her.

And our lives, once again, reshaped themselves around survival.

While my mother was bedridden, our world grew smaller and quieter, orbiting almost entirely around the room where she lay. The house, once full of tension and movement, became a place of hushed footsteps and careful routines. My sister, who had been studying Engineering at university, made the difficult decision to pause her studies so she could care for our mother.

It was not an easy sacrifice, though she never spoke of it that way.

We did have a carer who came to help during that time, someone kind who assisted with the practical tasks my mother could no longer manage. But for us, it never felt enough to leave her care entirely in someone else's hands. Our mother had

given us nothing but tenderness and patience our whole lives—an almost miraculous gentleness considering the cruelty she endured from her husband. Caring for her ourselves felt like the only way to return even a fraction of the love she had poured into us.

So my sister stepped into that role.

In truth, I think part of her was quietly relieved to step away from university, even if only for a time. Engineering had never been her dream. It had been my father's.

Years before, he had wanted to become an engineer himself but had never been able to pursue it. Rather than letting that dream die with him, he forced it onto my sister's shoulders. To him, she was not a young woman discovering her own path. She was a vessel for the ambitions he had failed to achieve. Studying Engineering was simply another form of control.

There a part of this story I have long hesitated to tell. Even now, the words do not come easily.

While my mother lay in that bed — unable to speak, unable to move, dependent on those around her for everything — a second bed was placed beside her. It was meant for a carer, someone to keep watch through the night. That person was my sister.

What happened in that room, in the dark, while my mother lay inches away, is something I still struggle to hold in my mind. My father used that bed, and the vulnerability of everyone in it, to continue his abuse.

I have asked myself many times whether a person can truly be that cruel. Whether something that feels so incomprehensible can really be real. But it was real.

It was our reality. And my sister carried that weight in silence, in a room where our mother could neither protect her nor ever know. She carried that burden the way she carried so many others — quietly, and without complaint, as though silence itself was the only shelter available to her. But there is only so much a person can hold.

The weight of our home, the abuse she endured in the dark, the constant fear, the slow and helpless watching of our mother's decline — all of it accumulated, layer upon layer, with nowhere to go. The anger and grief inside her had to escape somehow.

She found that escape in running.

At first it was simply a way to leave the house for a while, to breathe air that wasn't thick with fear. But she ran with an intensity that seemed almost supernatural. I believe now that she was running with everything she carried inside her—the rage, the helplessness, the exhaustion.

When she ran, it was as though all of that pain propelled her forward.

She became remarkably fast, specializing in short-distance races. Her dedication and natural ability quickly caught the attention of the university, and before long she had qualified for their athletics team.

Running became one of the few things in her life that truly belonged to her.

Eventually, she became so good that she was selected to represent the university in a competition in another city. For a brief moment, it looked as though she might step beyond the suffocating reach of our father's control.

But the thought of her leaving—even temporarily—was something he could not tolerate.

When he learned she would be travelling for the competition, he erupted into a rage unlike anything we had seen before. His anger seemed almost feral, as though the mere possibility of losing control over her had pushed him beyond reason.

In the kitchen, he grabbed a knife.

What happened next is something I still struggle to think about.

He stabbed her in the leg.

The blade cut deeply, tearing through her flesh in a long, brutal gash that ran from her knee down her shin. The wound was savage, a violent slash that mirrored the invisible wounds he had carved into her spirit for years.

To me, it felt like a physical manifestation of the scars he had already left inside her.

Yet somehow, even after something so horrific, the outside world continued to see us as a normal family.

My father had always been exceptionally charming with other people. In public, he was polite, charismatic, even warm. It was a mask he wore so convincingly that many people simply could not imagine the reality that existed inside our home.

After stabbing my sister, he calmly told anyone who asked that she had fallen down the stairs and landed on a knife that had been left there.

Even now, I wonder if anyone truly believed that story. A knife positioned so perfectly that someone could fall directly onto it and carve such a wound? It seems impossible.

And yet no one questioned it.

He took her to the hospital, just as he had taken her before for the two abortions he forced her to have, pregnancies caused by the abuse he inflicted upon her himself. No doctor raised an alarm. No nurse asked difficult questions.

No one batted an eye.

My sister learned very young that survival often meant compliance. If she obeyed him, if she did exactly what he demanded, sometimes there would be moments of fragile peace. Those moments were never guaranteed, but they were enough to keep her trying.

I know now that part of her compliance came from another fear entirely: that if she resisted too much, my father might turn his attention toward me.

She was terrified that the cycle of abuse would continue through me once he had finished with her.

But something began to shift inside her as our mother grew weaker.

As she cared for our mother's fragile body—lifting her, feeding her, watching the life slowly drain from someone who had fought so hard for all of us—my sister began to find a different kind of strength. Our mother had spent her life helping other women reclaim their dignity and power. Even in sickness, that quiet strength still radiated from her.

And my sister absorbed it.

She made a promise to herself while sitting beside our mother's bed: he would never touch her again.

For years she had complied with his demands to avoid provoking his rage. She had lived according to his rules, bending herself to survive the cruelty he inflicted. But now something inside her had hardened into resolve.

Her body was her own.

Her mind was her own.

And whatever the consequences might be, she would not give him either of those things ever again.

Still, knowing that someone is going to die is very different from actually losing them.

For years we had lived with the understanding that my mother might not survive her illness. The tumour, the surgeries—it all pointed toward a future none of us wanted to imagine.

But when the moment finally came, it still felt impossible.

I was thirteen years old the ~~night~~ **day** my mother died.

Her body had become frail, weakened by both the cancer and the powerful medications meant to fight it. She seemed smaller somehow, as though the illness had slowly taken pieces of her away.

My father's brother was a doctor, and one night I overheard the two of them speaking quietly. Their voices were low, but the words carried clearly enough.

She would not survive the night.

I lay awake for hours after hearing that, trying to understand what it meant. Trying to imagine a world that did not contain my mother.

To this day, I do not know exactly how she died. Whether the ~~machines~~ **drip** keeping her alive was turned off, or whether her body simply gave up after fighting for so long.

All I know is that the next morning, she was gone.

From the moment I was born, I had been my mother's little helper. My father made sure that my sister and I were never allowed to grow close to each other. He wanted my sister completely under his control, and he carefully manipulated every relationship inside our family to maintain that control.

As a result, I became my mother's shadow.

I followed her everywhere as a small child, trailing behind her from room to room. I would tug gently on her dress if she moved too far away, desperate to stay near her. I filled the quiet moments with endless chatter, telling her stories, asking questions, inventing little worlds just to make her smile.

I think she held me longer than she might have otherwise, knowing that I was her youngest child—her last baby. There would be no more after me, and perhaps some part of her sensed that our time together would be shorter than it should have been.

Then suddenly, she was gone.

My sister and I had slipped away briefly — just long enough to try on the black skirts our aunt, my mother's sister, had been sewing for us. Skirts made in anticipation of a day we knew was coming but were not ready to face. We were barely gone any time at all.

And that was when she left.

I have thought about that many times since. Whether she waited. Whether, in whatever way the dying are able to choose, she chose a moment when her girls were not watching. I will never know. But there is both a tenderness and an ache in that thought that has never fully left me.

The house felt hollow without her.

I remember feeling as though something fundamental inside me had disappeared. As if the centre of my world had been quietly removed in the space of an ordinary moment, while life was still happening all around us.

I felt fragile in a way I had never felt before. As though if anyone touched me, I might simply dissolve into nothing. Like dust scattering into the air.

Our home carried an echo after she died—an emptiness that lingered in every room. It was as if her presence still hovered there, just out of reach, reminding me of what we had lost.

We buried her body, but the absence she left behind remained.

And I missed her with every fibre of my being.

I still do.

After my mother died, whatever fragile thread had once connected my father and my brother snapped completely. There was no attempt at reconciliation, no shared grief that might have softened the space between them. Instead, the distance became absolute.

My brother had never been allowed inside the house at all. Even when my mother was alive, her presence had softened something — not enough to make it safe, but enough to make it feel, in some quiet way, like there was still a family worth holding together. She had been a kind of invisible thread, keeping the shape of something human in place, even as everything around it frayed.

But my brother had never been part of that. He had no home to lose — because he had never truly been given one to begin with.

With my mother gone, there was nothing left to soften my father. The house became his fortress entirely, and he guarded it fiercely — as though her absence had finally given him permission to claim it as his own.

If I wanted to see Miguel, we had to do so in secret.

He would arrange to meet me quietly, sometimes on a street corner, sometimes near the school gates, sometimes in places where my father was unlikely to appear. Despite the danger of it, he checked on us as often as he could. He knew that with my

mother gone there was no one left in the house to witness my father's cruelty, no one to soften the blows or intervene when his anger erupted.

It was just my sister and me now, alone with him.

When my sister finally refused to allow my father to touch her again, the fear she had carried for years became a reality.

His attention turned to me.

I remember the night with painful clarity. I was in my bedroom when he came in. The house was quiet, the kind of quiet that settles late at night when everyone else is asleep. But the moment he entered the room, something inside me immediately knew that the quiet was about to break.

He tried to touch me.

The panic that rose inside me felt like fire. I shouted at him—louder than I had ever shouted at him before. I screamed at him to stop, my voice shaking with a mixture of terror and fury.

Something about my reaction must have startled him enough to make him back away. But the damage had already been done. The threat that had lived quietly in the back of my sister's mind for years had stepped fully into the light.

The next morning I told her what had happened. The words came out in a rush, tangled with tears and anger.

"I'm leaving," I told her, my voice firm and final. "I'm running away. I don't care where I go, but I'm not staying here."

At that moment I meant it with every part of me. I would rather face the uncertainty of the world outside than spend another night under the same roof as my father.

By that time, my sister had met someone.

His name was Alex.

Alex was big, broad shouldered and muscular, the kind of man who seemed physically incapable of being intimidated. My father hated him immediately, perhaps sensing that Alex was not someone he could easily control.

But Alex had fallen in love with my sister, and when he learned about the abuse she had endured, he made it clear that he intended to protect her, and me, however he could. In many ways he stepped into the role my brother had once tried to fill, standing between us and the man who had terrorized our childhood.

When my sister heard that I was planning to run away, she didn't hesitate.

She refused to let me do it alone.

She had already told Alex everything, about our father, about the years of violence, about the secret horrors our family had endured. And Alex was ready. If we needed help leaving, he would help us.

Alex was living in a shared house while attending university. As it happened, he and his roommate were already in the process of moving to new accommodation, and the timing could not have been more fortunate. Their move left a vacant room behind — and that room became ours. My sister and I moved in, and for the first time in longer than I could remember, we had a safe place to call home. It all happened very quickly after that.

One day, when my father left for work, we knew it was our moment.

We had packed our suitcases in secret beforehand, hiding them where he wouldn't notice. My sister and I dragged them quietly down the stairs, every creak of the house making our hearts race. It felt as though the walls themselves might betray us at any moment.

Outside, a car waited.

My sister had borrowed it from our uncle, though even that felt like a risk. We loaded the suitcases into the car and climbed in, our hands trembling with the enormity of what we were doing.

We were leaving.

Truly leaving.

The fear followed us the entire drive. What if my father discovered us before we got away? What if he came looking? What would happen if he found us?

We knew he would eventually learn where we had gone. That part was inevitable.

And he did.

But when he arrived looking for us, he didn't find two frightened girls.

He found Alex.

Alex, who was more than ready to stand his ground.

Later, my sister told me with unmistakable satisfaction that our father had been afraid of him. The idea that the man who had ruled our lives through terror might feel even a fraction of that fear himself felt like justice.

After that, we never saw him again.

We closed the door on that house—on all the secrets buried inside it—and walked away.

For the first time in our lives, we were safe.

Sometimes I still think about him, though. Not with longing, and not with bitterness.

What I feel is harder to name than either of those things.

I wish him freedom — freedom from whatever it is that made him capable of such harm, from the blindness that allowed him to move through our lives without

ever truly seeing the pain he left behind. I wish him clarity, and the peace that might come if he ever finds it.

I wish him well. That has never been something I had to work toward — it is simply what I have always felt. And alongside that wish sits something perhaps unexpected: a genuine gratitude for the life those experiences have shaped. The pain was real. But so is everything it gave me — the understanding, the compassion, the deep and unshakeable knowing of what it means to need someone to truly see you.

Meanwhile, life continued in its quiet, unexpected ways. I kept attending school, though academics never came easily to me the way they did for my sister. She had always been the brilliant one, the natural student. I struggled more, and truthfully I didn't enjoy school very much at all. But I kept trying.

And while I was still finishing school, my sister and Alex received life-changing news.

They were expecting a baby.

Nine months later, my niece Isabella was born. Her arrival felt like a small miracle, a new life appearing after so much loss and pain. My sister and Alex eventually bought a small house together, creating a home that was warm, safe, and filled with love.

When I turned seventeen, I moved in with them and helped care for Isabella.

During that time, Alex was studying biology and working on a conservation program deep in one of Colombia's rainforests. Through that work he met a British

biologist named Paul. Paul had travelled to Colombia for research, and during his visit his father and brother came over from England to support him.

The brother's name was Stephen.

One day Alex came home full of excitement about his new friend and asked my sister if Paul and his family could come over for dinner. My sister agreed immediately, saying she would cook for them.

Before I even met Stephen, though, I had already built a picture of him in my mind.

For years, since I was about eleven or twelve, I had quietly dreamed of one day marrying someone from a Western country. In my imagination he had blue eyes and lived in a safe, peaceful home far away from the violence of my childhood. He would take me to another country where life felt different—lighter, freer.

I told all my friends about this dream as if it were a certainty.

So, when Stephen arrived at the house, with his light brown hair and bright blue eyes, I felt as though the universe had played a very strange trick on me. He was twenty-three years old and, to my seventeen-year-old eyes, one of the most handsome men I had ever seen.

At one point my sister asked me to go to the shops to buy potatoes for dinner. I glanced over at Stephen and, with far more boldness than I usually possessed, asked if he wanted to come with me.

The truth was that my English was not very good. I knew the basics, and English had always been my favourite subject at school, but conversation did not come easily.

Still, we managed.

The two of us walked to the shops, piecing together a conversation in broken English and patient smiles. By the time we returned with the potatoes, I had already decided something in my heart.

Stephen, with his kind blue eyes, was my future.

Unfortunately, my sister's dinner of chicken and mushrooms gave our guests terrible food poisoning, which meant they had to cancel their travel plans the next day. My sister felt horrified and guilty, but secretly I was grateful for the extra time. It gave Stephen and me a chance to exchange contact details before he left.

Not long after meeting him—and just before my niece's first birthday—I announced to my family that I wanted to go to university in Bogotá, the capital of Colombia.

Everyone was shocked.

Given how much I had disliked school, the idea that I suddenly wanted to attend university seemed completely out of character. But the truth was that I needed a reason to move to the city.

Money was extremely tight. We survived partly on a small pension that came from my mother's death. It was enough to help me travel to Bogotá and attempt to enter the course I wanted, though the university was incredibly competitive. My grades were not strong enough on their own, so I knew I would have to support myself while trying to improve my chances. I found work selling English courses to people in the city.

Meanwhile, Stephen and I kept in contact through letters.

There was no internet in those days, and international phone calls between Colombia and the United Kingdom were unbelievably expensive. But Stephen was

determined. Despite living in London, he would travel an hour to Oxford to visit his sister-in-law, who spoke Spanish.

He would write a sentence in English, and she would translate it into Spanish.

Then another sentence. And another.

Line by line, they built entire letters together.

Every time one of those letters arrived, I felt like the happiest girl in the world. I would smile, kick my feet, dance around the room. No one had ever made me feel that cherished before.

Eventually we arranged for him to come back to Colombia to visit me.

At the end of that trip, he asked if I wanted to move to the United Kingdom and live with him in London.

I thought about it for perhaps five seconds.

Then I jumped on him and shouted yes.

It felt like the beginning of a grand adventure, one that would carry me far away from the shadows of my past. Our plan was for me to travel on a student visa, so Stephen returned to London and began making arrangements. He took out a loan to pay for my enrolment in an English school and even purchased my plane ticket.

I could barely contain my excitement.

I wanted to leave in December, six months after my eighteenth imagining the magical cold of an English Christmas. The heat of Colombia suddenly felt like something I was ready to leave behind.

But when I attended my visa interview at the embassy in Bogotá, things went terribly wrong.

Two people interviewed me. A stern British woman and a softer colleague beside her. It quickly became clear they were playing good cop and bad cop.

When the stern woman asked about my plans in England, I answered honestly.

“I’m going to live there with my boyfriend,” I said. “And if I like it, I’ll stay.”

It was exactly the wrong answer.

A student visa requires proof that you intend to return home. My answer suggested the opposite.

A few days later I returned to collect my passport and discovered my visa had been denied. The word **DENIED** stamped across the page felt like watching my dreams melt like chocolate in the hot Colombian sun. Sticky and disappointing.

But as I stood there holding my passport, the kinder interviewer quietly leaned forward and said something that changed everything.

“The only way you’ll get to London,” she told me, “is with a fiancé visa. But you’ll need to marry within six months.”

Hope flared again.

That night I called Stephen collect at two in the morning London time.

“You have to marry me,” I blurted when he answered sleepily. “It’s the only way I can come.”

There was a pause.

“Okay,” he said.

And just like that, we were engaged.

It may not have been the most romantic proposal in history, but it worked.

Soon after, we faced one final obstacle: my plane ticket.

In those days you needed a printed ticket to board a flight. Stephen assured me it would be waiting at the airport.

But when I arrived, the staff told me it was actually in an office in the city centre.

Forty-five minutes away.

My flight was leaving soon.

Panic surged through me, but I made a decision.

"I'm going to get it," I told Stephen on the phone. "I'll make it back somehow."

I jumped into a taxi and explained the situation to the driver, who must have heard the desperation in my voice because he drove like a man on a mission. When we reached the office, I hesitated, worried he might drive off with my suitcase.

"Don't worry," he said. "I'll watch your bag."

Miraculously, when I ran back outside with my ticket in hand, he was still there. He raced me back to the airport, and I arrived just minutes before check-in closed. I sprinted through the terminal toward the gate, my heart pounding.

Nothing was going to stop me from reaching my new life.

And before I even had time to call Stephen to say I had made it, I was already on the plane.

The flight to England felt impossibly long. More than twenty hours of travel stretched ahead of me, and although I had been bursting with excitement when I boarded the plane, the hours in the air slowly began to blur together. I watched the sky change through the small oval window beside me, darkness giving way to pale morning light, clouds stretching endlessly beneath the wings. I was leaving behind everything I had ever known: the heat of Colombia, the sounds of Spanish drifting through crowded streets, the memories of both pain and love that had shaped my childhood.

I was also flying toward something completely unknown.

When the plane finally landed in London, I thought the hardest part was over. But stepping into the airport only began another ordeal. Because of the visa I was travelling on and the circumstances of my arrival, I was taken aside by immigration

officers for additional checks. One by one, they ran through a series of examinations, medical screenings, X-rays, questions, and drug tests. I moved from one sterile room to another, exhausted from the journey and increasingly anxious.

All the while, one thought kept repeating in my mind: *Stephen has no idea I'm here.*

The last time we had spoken, I had told him that I didn't have a plane ticket and that I was rushing into the city to try and retrieve it. After that frantic phone call, everything had moved so quickly that I never had the chance to call him again. Now, as the hours ticked by in customs, I imagined him waiting at the airport, checking the arriving passengers, wondering whether I had made it onto the plane at all.

By the time they finally finished the extra checks and allowed me to leave the customs area, nearly twenty-four hours had passed since that last conversation.

Stephen had been waiting almost the entire time.

Later he told me that he had just about reached the point where he believed I hadn't made it, he had called the airline numerous times and pressed staff at the desk for information, but privacy rules meant nobody would tell him a thing — not even whether my name had been checked off a passenger list. He had simply stood there, waiting, with no way of knowing. He was preparing to leave the airport, convinced that somehow everything had fallen apart.

And then I walked out.

I spotted him standing there beyond the barrier, scanning the crowd of passengers emerging from customs. When he saw me, his entire face changed. The relief that spread across it was something I will never forget.

It was one of those moments that feels almost cinematic. Two people finding each other in the chaos of an airport after believing the other might never arrive. He

spotted me before I spotted him — and before I had a chance to say a word, he threw my bag aside, grabbed me, lifted me off the ground, and kissed me. Then he spun me around, right there in the middle of the terminal, as though he wanted the whole world to know that I had made it. That we had made it.

In that instant, I knew I had made exactly the right decision.

I had arrived in England on Christmas Eve. When we finally left the airport together, it was already dark outside, even though it was only four in the afternoon.

I remember staring out at the sky in complete confusion.

“What happened?” I asked Stephen. “Was it the end of the world and I had just arrived? Why is it night already?”

Stephen laughed gently.

“It always gets dark around 4:30 in winter,” he explained.

The idea felt impossible to me. In Colombia, the days and nights followed a rhythm I understood. The country sits close to the equator, and our seasons are not defined by temperature but by rain, wet season and dry season. The sun rises and sets in a predictable way.

But here the world seemed to operate differently.

And then there was the cold.

I had never experienced anything like it before. The sun was shining brightly in the sky, yet the air was freezing. I could see my breath as we stood outside the airport, and I wrapped my coat tighter around myself, completely baffled by how sunshine and bitter cold could exist together.

England already felt like another planet.

On Christmas Day we visited Stephen's family. They had never met me before, yet their son was suddenly arriving home with a young woman from Colombia whom he intended to marry.

It could have been awkward. It could have been uncomfortable.

Instead, they welcomed me with warmth and kindness.

They helped us organise our wedding, guiding us through all the practical details that Stephen and I barely understood. The ceremony itself was simple and modest, but to me it felt magical. Standing there beside Stephen, surrounded by people who had opened their hearts to me, I felt a happiness that was almost overwhelming.

For the first time in my life, I felt safe and hopeful about the future.

Married life came naturally to us. We settled into it with surprising ease, learning how to build a life together day by day.

Two years after our wedding, I discovered that I was pregnant.

The news filled us with joy, but that joy was heartbreakingly short-lived. At twenty-eight weeks pregnant, we lost the baby.

The grief that followed was enormous. Losing a child is a pain that settles deep inside your bones, and navigating that loss so early in our marriage was incredibly difficult. We were both young, still learning how to be adults, let alone how to carry something as heavy as that kind of grief.

But we supported each other the best we could.

And about a year later, we were pregnant again.

This time I carried fear with me throughout the entire pregnancy. Every small ache or unfamiliar feeling made my heart race. I was terrified that history might repeat itself.

But this pregnancy continued safely, week after week, until finally we reached full term.

Our daughter was born healthy and perfect.

We named her Althea.

I remember staring endlessly at her tiny face, studying every detail as though I could somehow memorise her completely, the delicate curve of her nose, her soft hands, the way her little feet curled slightly when she slept. Stephen and I were completely in awe of her.

She felt like a miracle.

Before she was born, I had been working as a domestic cleaner, but once Althea arrived I stayed home to care for her. I didn't mind in the slightest. I loved every moment of being with her, the way she smiled, the sound of her laughter, the quiet afternoons spent holding her while she slept.

Stephen and I fell deeply in love with our little family.

Not long after, our second child arrived, Jacob, our strong and determined son. And then came Naomi, our beautiful, kind and full of joy third child. Each of them brought their own energy and personality into our home, filling it with noise, chaos, and endless love.

Motherhood changed me in ways I never expected.

Before having children, I had dreamed of studying architecture. For a while I even began exploring the idea seriously. But as I looked around at others who seemed more confident and talented than I was, my own self-doubt crept in. Slowly, I lost the belief that I was capable of pursuing it.

So I let that dream fade quietly into the background.

Yet even as the years passed, a small voice in the back of my mind continued to whisper about it.

For the time being, though, I poured my heart into raising our children. Through them I discovered a different version of myself, who turned out to be someone who could be both gentle and strong at the same time. Motherhood arrived with a joy I had not anticipated — and with a mirror I was not entirely prepared to look into.

As much as I wanted to give my children the safe and loving home I had never known, I found myself caught off guard by what surfaced in me. The very thing I had longed to create seemed to expose everything in me that remained unresolved. Managing a home, steadying my emotions, showing up fully for small people who needed everything — it asked more of me than I yet knew how to give.

I did not have the tools. Not yet. And in that vulnerability, I found myself drawn toward faith. Religion became a place to rest, to seek, to make sense of things that had no other framework. It was not a perfect answer, but it was somewhere to put the weight of what I was carrying while I tried to find my footing as a mother and as a woman still quietly becoming herself.

For me, Christianity became something of a lifeline.

I had grown up around religion, my grandparents were devout Catholics, and I had always believed that some kind of higher power existed beyond our human struggles. But the church we joined in England offered something new: a community that felt supportive, safe, and deeply compassionate.

For the first time, I began to recognise just how much healing I still needed from my childhood.

I started seeing a counsellor regularly, and those conversations helped me process the trauma I had carried for so many years. Slowly, I began to untangle the pain of a childhood filled with violence and fear.

The church community played a huge role in that healing. They welcomed us warmly, offering friendship and encouragement as we navigated our new life. Each Sunday we attended services, and during the week we volunteered with programs supporting people who were struggling or underprivileged.

Helping others felt deeply meaningful to me.

In many ways, it made me feel connected to my mother. She had spent her life helping vulnerable women find strength in challenging circumstances, and through our volunteer work I felt as though I was continuing a small piece of her legacy.

Eventually, the church community also created an opportunity for us to move from London to the north of England. At the time it seemed like a positive step forward. We became involved in supporting a charity that operated in Colombia, something that felt especially close to my heart.

But as time passed, Stephen and I began noticing troubling inconsistencies. The charity's financial records didn't quite add up. Money that was meant to support vulnerable communities seemed to be disappearing or being spent in ways that didn't match what we had been told.

The more we asked questions, the more uneasy we became.

Eventually it became clear that the funds were not going where the charity claimed they were. When we attempted to bring the inconsistencies to light, we were accused of being "of the devil and betrayers of the church of God."

At the same time, life in the north of England began to weigh on us in other ways. The weather there was far harsher than we had expected—long stretches of

grey skies, constant drizzle, and cold winds that seemed to seep into everything. The gloom of the climate seemed to affect the people around us as well. Many of them carried a heaviness that mirrored the grey skies above. And we could see that our children were feeling it too.

Something had to change.

The irony of the spiritual path that Christianity had opened for me was that, over time, it began to lead me somewhere the church itself did not expect.

For many years, the church had been a place of healing. It had offered me safety, guidance, and a community that helped me piece together parts of myself that had been broken during childhood. I had entered that world grateful for the sense of belonging it gave me. But the deeper I explored my own spirituality, the more I began to notice things that unsettled me.

Gradually, almost quietly at first, my perspective began to shift.

I found myself questioning ideas that I had once accepted without hesitation. The church spoke often about truth, *the* truth. One God, one path, one way to understand the world. But as my own spiritual awareness expanded, that certainty began to feel too narrow for what I was experiencing inside myself. I could no longer believe that one belief system alone held the entirety of truth.

Faith, I realised, could not be contained inside one building or one set of rules. Another part of my discomfort came from the way I saw some members of the church treating people who did not fit neatly into their idea of righteousness. One of my closest

friends was gay, and watching the way she was spoken about—and sometimes spoken *to*—left me feeling deeply troubled.

This community that had once made me feel safe and supported was now showing another side of itself. A side that judged, excluded, and sometimes shamed people simply for who they were.

I could not reconcile that with the compassion and love that faith was supposed to represent.

After nearly fifteen years within the church, I began to realise that my spiritual journey was no longer aligned with the path it offered. I didn't abandon spirituality; if anything, my connection to it deepened. But I knew that I needed to explore it in a way that felt more open, more compassionate, and more honest to my own beliefs.

At the same time, life in the north of England continued to feel heavy. The endless grey skies and damp cold seemed to seep into everything, including our moods. Stephen and I both felt increasingly restless, as though something inside us was quietly urging us toward change.

It was during this period that I became involved in a conservation project through my sister.

Despite the unimaginable trauma she had endured during our childhood, my sister had grown into an extraordinary woman. After I left for England, she and Alex separated a couple of years later, and she poured her energy into advancing her engineering career. Over time, she became an influential voice in Colombia, particularly in areas related to women's empowerment and environmental conservation.

Her strength has always amazed me.

Instead of allowing her suffering to define her, she transformed it into something powerful, using her experiences to advocate for women ~~some of them~~ ~~who were~~ facing violence and oppression, much like she had. In so many ways, she carried forward the same compassion and determination that our mother had embodied during her life.

All of us, in our own ways, have tried to live lives that would make our mother proud.

During one of my sister's visits to the UK, she brought Isabella with her and accepted a job with an engineering firm in London. While she was there, she reconnected with Paul. They realised they had far more in common than they had originally thought, so they decided to get married and welcomed another child into their family, a little boy named William.

Through her conservation work, she introduced me to a project that supported Colombian women in creating sustainable jewellery. The material they used came from a fruit that grows in South America. When the fruit hardens, it forms a substance remarkably similar to ivory, but completely natural and environmentally friendly. My role in the project involved helping with marketing and promotion. I worked on raising awareness about the conservation efforts behind the jewellery and helped place the pieces in shops and markets. It felt meaningful to contribute to something that supported both women and the environment.

It also connected me to Colombia again in a way I hadn't expected.

At one point, my sister presented Stephen and me with an unexpected opportunity. She asked if we would consider helping to run an eco-lodge in Colombia that was connected to her conservation efforts. The idea immediately captured our imaginations. Without hesitation, we said yes.

For nine months, we returned to Colombia and lived among the lush beauty of the eco-lodge. Our days were spent caring for the grounds, welcoming visitors, and immersing ourselves in the natural environment that surrounded us. It didn't take long for us to notice something important. We were happier.

The warmth of the sun, the vibrant colours of the landscape, and the familiarity of the culture all seemed to lift our spirits. Compared to the grey drizzle of Yorkshire, Colombia felt alive.

When the nine months came to an end and we returned to the UK, the adjustment was harder than ever. The cold, the rain, and the heavy skies seemed even more oppressive after experiencing such warmth and light.

It became increasingly clear that we needed something different for our lives. Around this time, I began thinking about Australia.

Stephen had been born in Melbourne, which meant that moving there might be easier for us than for many other families navigating immigration processes. The idea of sunshine, space, and a fresh start began to feel incredibly appealing. Once the thought entered my mind, I threw myself into researching everything I could about the possibility.

During one of my late-night research sessions, I stumbled across a television show in the UK called *Wanted Down Under*. The premise was simple but fascinating: families who were considering emigrating to Australia could apply to participate. If selected, they would be flown to Australia to spend time exploring what life there might actually be like. I joked to Stephen that we should apply. To my surprise, he immediately agreed. So I sat down and carefully wrote our application, describing our family and our hopes for a new life somewhere warmer and brighter.

Out of thousands of applications, ours was chosen. We were absolutely over the moon.

It felt like the perfect opportunity to explore whether Australia truly could become our new home. The children were beside themselves with excitement, imagining beaches, sunshine, and adventures in a completely different country.

During my research, I had initially focused on Brisbane as a possible place to live. At that time, I didn't even know that the Gold Coast existed. But while filming the show, the producers took us to explore the surrounding regions, including the Gold Coast. Some aspects of the program were clearly staged for television. Stephen even had to participate in a pretend job interview as a park ranger because environmental work had always interested him. But what wasn't staged at all was how we felt about Australia.

Stephen had been working as a logistics manager for a tool company in the UK, but his true interests had always leaned toward conservation and environmental work, much like his brother. Even the fictional park ranger interview sparked a genuine excitement in him about what life here might hold.

One of the producers happened to live locally in Tallebudgera and mentioned how beautiful the area was. The first time I saw Tallebudgera Creek, I felt something shift inside me. The water shimmered in the sunlight, framed by lush green hills and golden sand. It was breathtakingly beautiful.

In that moment, Stephen and I looked at each other and knew. The Gold Coast was where we wanted to be.

After finishing filming in Australia, we returned to the UK to complete the final part of the show. Almost immediately, we began organising the enormous task of relocating our entire family to the other side of the world.

Later, once we had moved over, we even had the chance to film a “Where Are They Now?” segment for the program, proudly confirming that we had indeed moved Down Under.

Our new home was in Currumbin, on the southern end of the Gold Coast. We loved the quieter atmosphere there and quickly discovered that Palm Beach Currumbin State High School seemed like a wonderful place for the children. At that time, Naomi and Jacob were still in high school, while Ally had already finished school.

Ally found the transition much harder than the rest of us. The UK had been her home for her entire life, and Australia felt foreign and unfamiliar. She struggled to see the appeal of leaving everything she knew behind. In the end, she chose to remain in the UK a little longer so she could complete her studies before joining us.

When we first arrived in Australia, the four of us lived temporarily in an Airbnb while we searched for a permanent home. Thankfully, we found a house online quite quickly in the area we hoped to settle in. When we went to view the property, we met the owner, Bob.

Bob was a wonderfully kind and hilarious British man who seemed to take an immediate liking to us. He introduced us to his wife, Keo. In a new country where everything felt unfamiliar, their friendship became an unexpected gift.

It reminded me of the sense of community we had once felt within the church in England, the feeling of being welcomed and embraced by people who genuinely cared. Settling into life on the Gold Coast felt exciting and full of possibility.

Not long after arriving, I found work with Flight Centre in their Travel Money Concierge program. My role involved assisting travellers who needed to exchange currency before heading overseas.

I loved the conversations that came with the job. Every day I met people heading to different parts of the world, some travelling for holidays, others for family visits, weddings, or once-in-a-lifetime adventures. Their excitement was infectious. But then, in 2020, the world suddenly changed.

COVID swept across the globe, and international travel came to a complete halt. Airports emptied, flights were cancelled, and entire industries shut down almost overnight.

Like so many others, I lost my job.

The uncertainty during that time was immense. No one knew how long the pandemic would last or what the future would look like. Yet even during that strange and frightening period, I often found myself feeling grateful. Because while the world was struggling everywhere, I knew that we were incredibly fortunate to be experiencing it in Queensland, under wide blue skies and warm sunshine, rather than in the locked-down grey of the UK.

During the long, strange stillness of the COVID years, my spiritual journey continued to deepen. In many ways, that period of quiet forced reflection allowed parts of myself to surface that I had not fully understood before. But with that growth came consequences I had not anticipated.

Sadly, the changes I was experiencing began to place strain on my marriage to Stephen.

It was not one single moment or event that shifted things between us. Rather, it was a gradual unfolding, two people slowly evolving in different directions without fully realising it at first. The deeper I moved into my spiritual exploration and self-

reflection, the more I began to see aspects of my life differently, including my role within our relationship.

I have always considered myself to be a very feminine person. For much of my life, that femininity expressed itself through softness, through nurturing, and through a willingness to support the people I loved. I was comfortable with being gentle and sometimes even submissive in the dynamic of a relationship. But over time something in our marriage began to change in ways that were difficult to articulate. Instead of one of us stepping forward with clarity and direction while the other supported, we both began bending further and further toward each other's needs, almost to the point of losing ourselves. Neither of us was really leading our life together anymore.

Instead, we had both become stuck.

In many ways we had grown complacent, drifting through our routines rather than truly communicating or connecting in the way we once had. Conversations that had once come easily between us became strained or avoided altogether.

It saddened me deeply because Stephen had been one of the kindest and gentlest men I had ever known. I still remember the young man who answered the phone groggily all those years ago and casually agreed to marry me when I proposed it over the telephone. That version of him had been warm, patient, and endlessly supportive.

But over the years, and perhaps especially after our move to Australia, something was shifting between us, and we both knew it.

As I began to question, to explore, to reach toward ideas and beliefs that were taking me further from the church and deeper into myself, Stephen struggled with who I was becoming. The woman he had known was changing, and the concepts I was

drawn to — the inner world I was beginning to inhabit — did not resonate with him.

He did not like where I was heading.

What had once been a shared foundation began to feel like a fault line. The distance between us grew quietly at first, and then less quietly. The atmosphere in our home shifted, and the ease that had once come naturally between us became something we had to search for.

It became clear to me that we were both deeply unhappy.

What hurt the most was not simply ~~fighting~~ circling the same unresolved frustrations, but the growing sense that we were no longer truly seeing each other. I felt invisible in ways that I had never experienced before, as though the person I had become was no longer understood by the man who had once known me so well. At the same time, I could see that Stephen was struggling too.

Sometimes people change in ways that make them better suited to a different kind of partner than the one they originally chose. I began to feel that perhaps Stephen needed someone more driven and assertive than the woman I had become. Someone who could help him realise his own needs in a way that I no longer could.

Coming to that realisation was incredibly painful.

But I also believe deeply that no one should feel compelled to shrink themselves, hide their light, or become someone they are not simply to preserve a relationship that has stopped nourishing both people. That truth applied not only to me but also to Stephen.

Even though he could not see it at the time, I understood that our separation might ultimately free both of us to become the people we were meant to be.

Unfortunately, when relationships end, pain often needs somewhere to land. Much of that pain landed on me. Stephen felt betrayed and abandoned by my decision, and he directed a great deal of blame in my direction.

I accepted it quietly.

If carrying that blame made it easier for him to let go of the marriage, then I was willing to bear it. But it still hurt deeply, particularly because it damaged the friendship that had once been the foundation of our relationship. And for the sake of our children, that loss felt especially heavy.

When the separation became official, I moved out and temporarily stayed with a friend.

Living with her provided a short-term refuge while I tried to piece together what the next chapter of my life might look like. But after a while it became clear that the arrangement was no longer working for either of us. So, I reached out to my old friend Bob, the kind British man who had first shown us the house in Currumbin when we arrived in Australia.

“Do you know anyone who might need a flatmate?” I asked him.

Without hesitation, Bob told me that he and his wife Keo had a small granny flat on their property that I could move into. The relief I felt in that moment was enormous. Moving into the granny flat gave me a small, peaceful space of my own while I adjusted to a completely new reality. Yet the transition was incredibly difficult in ways I had not fully anticipated.

For the first time in my life as a mother, I was no longer living under the same roof as my children.

Although we spoke every day, I no longer saw them every morning or heard their footsteps in the house. The quiet was often unbearable.

This change was particularly hard for Ally. She struggled deeply to understand why I had left her father, and from her perspective the decision felt sudden and confusing.

I understood her pain completely.

Having your parents separate is always difficult, but when the reasons are complex or invisible, it can be even harder to accept. Ally also felt a strong desire to support Stephen during that time, which I respected. He needed support, and she wanted to be there for him. So, I stepped back and gave her space.

Sadly, that distance slowly grew into silence, and eventually we stopped speaking altogether.

That period was one of the most painful chapters of my life.

But even during those quiet months, I held onto hope. I believed deeply in the bond between us and trusted that one day we would find our way back to each other.

And eventually, we did.

It took time, patience, and forgiveness from both of us. But today we are speaking again, and I could not be more proud of the strength that both of us showed during that difficult time.

Sometimes love requires space before it can return stronger.

My children mean everything to me. The last thing I ever wanted was to cause them pain through a decision that belonged only to Stephen and me. Yet I also believe that one of the most important lessons we can offer our children is the courage to live authentically. If two people are no longer growing together, if they can no longer be truthful about who they are becoming, then sometimes the most loving decision is to part ways as respectfully as possible.

Stephen will always hold a significant place in my heart.

He was my husband for many years, the father of my children, and the man with whom I shared countless memories, some joyful, some painful, but all deeply meaningful. From the young man who answered the phone and agreed to marry me without hesitation to the man who struggled through our separation feeling wounded and confused, every version of Stephen will always remain part of my story.

Life after our separation was far from smooth. At first it felt unstable and uncertain, as though the ground beneath my feet had shifted. But slowly, as I began to follow my own heart more honestly, I started to rediscover parts of myself that had been dormant for years.

And then, quite unexpectedly, someone new entered my life.

I have always loved Latin dancing. The music, the rhythm, the energy of the movement, it has always made me feel alive. Because of that passion, I regularly attended dance classes and social dance events.

One evening I met a man named Alex,

He seemed kind and confident, he told me he was very interested in learning Latin dancing. We met just as Stephen and I were struggling and deciding whether to go our separate ways.

At first I was suspicious and I wasn't ready to open my heart again so soon. Still, I told him I would send him the information about the dance classes. It took me a couple of days before I actually did it.

Eventually guilt got the better of me and I sent the details. To my surprise, he replied enthusiastically and suggested an exchange: he would learn Latin dancing from me if I would allow him to teach me how to surf.

I agreed very hesitantly and very quickly we discovered two important things.

First, surfing was absolutely not for me. I could barely swim, so why I ever thought agreeing to surfing lessons was a good idea remains a mystery.

Second, I turned out to be a terrible dance teacher.

I became increasingly frustrated when Alex couldn't pick up the steps quickly enough, and the lessons quickly dissolved into laughter and mild exasperation. Before long we both admitted that while we were not very good at teaching each other, we seemed to make a very good team in other ways.

At the time, things were still complicated. Stephen and I were technically still living together when Alex and I first met, so everything had to unfold slowly and carefully. But once the separation was truly complete, my connection with Alex began to feel natural and right.

I was not eager to rush into anything. I had learned, by then, to trust the quiet voice inside me more than the pull of urgency.

But there was something in Alex — a gentleness, a steadiness — that matched something in me I had only recently learned to recognise. We had both walked through the wreckage of marriages that had run their course. He was navigating the ending of his own at the same time I was finding my footing after mine, and that parallel pain added a tenderness and complexity to what was growing between us.

The timing was not without its cost. Our children saw us as they could only see us — through the eyes of their own hurt — and in that version of the story, we were the reason everything had fallen apart. I understood that. I held it with care. But what children cannot always see, and what only those inside a marriage truly know, is that its ending is rarely sudden. It is most often the final exhale of something that

has been quietly dying for years. For Alex, at least, that was the truth of it — years of enduring what had long since ceased to be a living thing.

We did not break families apart. We simply found each other on the other side of endings that had already been written.

In that shared vulnerability we found understanding.

We spoke often about the challenges of ending long relationships, especially when children are involved. Those conversations deepened our bond and created a foundation of honesty between us. Eventually we decided to move in together.

I packed up my belongings from the granny flat and began building a new life with Alex.

Today we share a happy and supportive relationship, though blending two families has brought challenges neither of us fully anticipated.

While Alex and I are strong together, bringing together children with different histories, loyalties, and personalities requires constant patience and communication. Our boys get along wonderfully, which has been a blessing. But there are still difficult days.

There are moments when my daughter and Alex clash, and others when Alex's daughter and I struggle to see eye to eye. Perhaps it is our sons who understand it most simply and most clearly. There is a quiet logic in the way they have accepted this — an uncomplicated recognition that choosing to be with someone out of love is not the same as staying out of duty. They seem to grasp, without needing it explained, that a home built on genuine choice is worth more than one held together by obligation alone.

Blended families are complex, living systems. But I firmly believe that communication is the key to navigating those complexities. As long as we keep talking, listening, and trying to understand each other, we will continue finding our way forward together.

Around the time I lost my job at Flight Centre, I began feeling restless and uncertain about my future. The pandemic had forced so many people to pause and reconsider their lives, and I found myself doing the same.

Once again, the idea of studying returned to my mind.

With Alex's encouragement, I decided to enrol in a counselling degree. The decision felt both exciting and terrifying. I had not been part of tertiary education for many years, and I worried about whether I would be able to keep up academically. But something inside me knew it was the right path. My life had been filled with experiences of pain, healing, spirituality, and self-discovery. I wanted to use those experiences to help others understand themselves and each other.

The three years that followed were intense.

There were many days when the workload felt overwhelming and I wondered whether I had made a mistake. At times it seemed impossible to keep going. During those moments, Alex was often the person who believed in me the most. Even when I doubted myself, he continued encouraging me, reminding me of the strength I carried within me.

Finally, in July 2024, after three years of hard work and determination, I graduated.

Holding my certificate in my hands felt like an extraordinary personal victory. In that moment I felt overwhelming pride, not just in the achievement itself, but in the

journey that had led me there. I felt love for the little girl who had grown up surrounded by secrets and fear. Love for the young woman who had travelled across the world to start a new life. Love for the mother who had made difficult decisions in order to remain true to herself.

And love for the woman who had finally learned to choose herself.

Seeing my name printed in elegant lettering on that degree felt like undeniable proof that I was capable of far more than I had once believed.

If I continued to believe in myself, if I continued choosing myself and committed to the learning of myself each day, there was very little I could not accomplish.

During my studies I became especially fascinated by hypnotherapy. The more I learned about it, the more I saw its extraordinary potential to help people transform their thinking, overcome emotional barriers, and achieve clarity in their lives.

Now that I had the foundation of my counselling degree, I knew this was the direction I wanted to pursue.

Today I am proud to say that I am a fully qualified hypnotherapist and psychotherapist.

Helping people uncover their own strength and insight has become one of the most fulfilling parts of my life. It feels as though everything I have experienced, the struggles, the healing, the self-discovery, has guided me toward this work. Through my counselling education I also came to see my father differently.

That does not excuse the harm he caused. Nothing could ever justify the violence and cruelty that shaped our childhood. But with time and understanding I have come to recognise that he was deeply unwell in ways none of us understood at the time. A deeper, clearer lens through which to see the patterns we carry — often without knowing we carry them — from our earliest experiences. I came to understand that

the unhelpful ways we move through the world are rarely chosen consciously. They are inherited, absorbed, shaped by what we were taught and what we were shown before we were old enough to question any of it.

I had forgiven my father long before I could fully explain why. That forgiveness was never something I had to fight for — it was simply where I had always lived in relation to him. What my education gave me was not the ability to forgive, but the framework to understand. To see him not only as the man who caused harm, but as someone who was himself shaped by forces he never examined and patterns he never escaped.

What it also gave me was this: the clear and liberating understanding that regardless of what we have inherited, we are each responsible for who we choose to become. That knowledge did not make the past lighter. But it made the future entirely my own."

‡ I feel grateful that despite the darkness of my childhood, I have been able to transform that pain into something meaningful.

Into compassion.

Into love.

Into a desire to guide others.

Now, with my own children grown, I feel that I continue honouring my mother in small ways through the work I do and the kindness I try to offer the world. Her light, her compassion, and her dedication to helping others remain a guiding force in my life.

These are the legacies that matter most. Not wealth or status, but love, empathy, and the courage to bring light into dark places.

For many years I was reluctant to share the details of my childhood with my children. As a mother, my instinct has always been to protect them. Shielding them from the painful realities of my past felt like an act of love. But as they have grown older, I have realised that understanding where I came from may help them understand who I am today, and why I have made certain choices, even the ones they did not always agree with. For too long the story of our childhood existed inside a house of secrets.

I no longer want those secrets to remain hidden.

Instead, I hope that by sharing the truth, we can meet each other with deeper compassion and understanding. And perhaps, through that understanding, we can continue walking forward together, held by love, by honesty, and by the light that always exists even in the darkest of histories.

If this story has touched something in you — if you recognise yourself anywhere within these pages, in the struggle, the searching, or the quiet and persistent hope — then perhaps our paths were always meant to cross.

I work with people who are ready to understand themselves more deeply, to gently examine the patterns that have shaped them, and to step into a life that feels truly their own. If you feel called to do that work, I would be honoured to walk alongside you.

My WHY has always been simple, even when my path was not. To be a vessel of love — empowering others to find harmony within themselves so that peace can ripple outward into the world.

Reach out. I would love to hear from you.

Elizabeth Lara

Counsellor, Psychotherapist, Clinical Hypnotherapist

Tallebudgera, Gold Coast

www.elizabethlara.com

hello@elizabethlara.com

A Gentle kind of Courage

Some people are hardened by their suffering. Elizabeth was not one of them.

Born into a childhood marked by fear, secrets, and loss, she grew up watching a mother who loved fiercely and endured quietly — a woman who poured her heart into others even as her own world was unravelling. She witnessed things no child should ever have to witness. She carried things no child should ever have to carry. And through it all, she held onto something that could not be taken from her — a soft, steady, unshakeable belief in the power of love.

A Gentle Kind of Courage is the story of what it means to walk through darkness without becoming it. It is a memoir about the patterns we inherit and the ones we choose to break, about the long and winding road toward understanding ourselves and those who shaped us, and about the extraordinary things that become possible when we choose love — not because life has been easy, but because we have learned, deeply and at great cost, that it is always worth choosing.

This is not a story about a woman who rose despite her softness. It is a story about a woman who rose because of it.

The memoir of Elizabeth Lara was produced by Brooke Turnbull of Reflections Writing Services across interviews undertaken in November 2025 and February 2026 at Elanora in Queensland

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