

Chapter one

"I was born on one of the hottest summers in British history – the summer of 1976 – to loving parents named Sally and Edward. They had been trying, unsuccessfully, for over five years to have me. Mom always said that from that moment, the minute she learned she was pregnant, everything changed for her. Knowing she was growing life inside of her made her feel an overwhelming amount of love and protection for me. Of course, being an immature child and hearing this, I didn't really appreciate or understand the weight and sentiment behind her words. Little did I know that it would be many years later, through the tears of my own pain, that I would finally see the love she had for me."

"Unfortunately – well, I say unfortunately, it really depends on your viewpoint – Mom and Dad were only blessed with having one child. It wasn't that they didn't want any more; they tried to give me a brother or sister to grow with. It's just that the good Lord above decided one child would be enough for my parents. Besides, I had lots of cousins on both sides of my family that I could play and grow with. Coming from a large family, I was never alone or short of attention. My childhood was nothing short of great, and I know I shouldn't say or admit this – my mother would shake her head and deny it, and my dad, well, let's just say he would shade his lips with a knowing smile and agree in silence, much to my mother's annoyance – but honestly, without sounding conceited, I had a very privileged childhood."

"I pretty much got what I wanted. If Mom said no, well, there was always Dad, and he was always easy to bend. Yet, regardless of their semi laid-back attitude and relaxed nature, their parenting had two major rules I was never allowed to break. As much as I could usually get my dad to give me what I wanted, I couldn't get him to let me off these rules."

"The first rule was that we attended church every Sunday as a family, part of our Catholic faith, and the second was to respect the rules of the house at all times – which meant all chores and homework, no matter how long it took, had to be completed before I was allowed to watch television or go outside and play with the neighbourhood kids – but, apart from those two rules, I had a very happy childhood filled with so many happy memories."

"Mom was a primary school teacher, teaching a class of seven-year-olds. Dad, well, he had what I considered a boring job, but he loved what he did as an accountant for an electronics company. Mom and Dad were so different, almost like chalk and cheese. If you saw them in a crowded room, you would never have said they were together. Mom was so vibrant, free-spirited, loved life, and lived for the moment – she never really took too much seriously. And Dad, as much as I loved him, he was stuffy. One of life's worriers – the stiff upper lip kind of man. But Mom had a way with him; she knew how to get him

to loosen up, relax, and not take everything so seriously. Despite their differences in personality, they were great together – and with both of them having reasonably good jobs, I was lucky enough to go on holiday twice a year and live in a nice home that allowed me to have a bedroom a young girl would dream of. But, privileges aside, Mom and Dad instilled memories in me, taught me about decency, treating others how you would want to be treated, and above all else, the importance of our faith in the Lord above.”

“Mom said I was a right little madam as a child, which of course I find very hard to believe, but there you go. Apparently, Mom often wondered if the doctors were wrong when they told her she had had a baby girl, because I acted so much like a boy. I preferred racing my bike against my male cousins down muddy dirt tracks than sitting down and playing with dolls and having pretend tea parties. I was forever climbing trees, hurting myself trying to do some sort of stunt and showing off. I know I shouldn't smile, but I can't help it when I remember the endless conversation she would have with me about this.”

“She honestly thought I did it on purpose, because guaranteed, I would always hurt myself just as she put the Sunday dinner in the oven. And then, bang on cue, I would be at the door bleeding from some cut or crying my little eyes out from hurting myself, which would always result in her having to take me to the hospital to get my cuts cleaned or my arm bandaged because I had sprained it. And we would always wait so long to get seen that by the time we got home, the food was ruined.”

“As you can imagine, Mom was not impressed. Yet, if it hadn't been for my daredevil persona and my latest stunt – trying to jump my bike over the small stream in the local park to copy my older cousins and falling off – I would never have met the girl who was to be my best friend, Susan, when I was nine. She had stopped playing on the swings that day and came to help me pull my bike free from the muddy sludge.”

“Susan was my red-haired friend. We were each other's sidekicks – my shadow, my double. We did everything and anything together. We were strong together, free spirits, pioneers making our own rules and experiencing life together, and she was, apart from Mom and Dad, the only other person I could trust.”

“Tomboyish behaviour aside, as the years went by and we grew from Barbie-loving schoolgirls to hormones beginning to creep in and take over, my boyish antics became less and less as I turned into a hormonal teenage girl. By the time I had finished secondary school and was preparing for the transition to college, I couldn't believe my luck when Susan told me my secret crush was going to the same college as me.”