

CHAPTER 1

My mother taught me what love was about but she died when I was thirteen years old. Then I moved to Kings Cross.

We were living at Oatley in 1948 at the time my mother died.

One afternoon in December I came home from school and found her. The minute I walked up the path to the front door I knew something was the matter. It was usually closed but today it was wide open and my ginger cat, Binkey, was prowling around outside the door. His bowl was empty and I knew he hadn't been fed.

I walked through the house. My mother wasn't there. Then I went out the back. My white rabbit, Alban was in his rabbit hutch and he was alright.

I found my mother lying underneath the lemon tree. It was a hot day and she might be resting but the minute I touched her and called her name, I knew. She didn't move.

I jumped back. I knew she'd gone but I couldn't believe it. I touched her again. She was so cold.

I wanted to do something. I knew I couldn't carry her inside. I had to get help. I ran to our Scotch neighbour over the street and asked her if she would come over because something had happened to my mother. It was the only thing I could do. There was none else.

The minute she saw Mum she knew. She turned to me and said, 'You understand what's happened?'

'Yes,' I answered.

I wanted to cry but I couldn't. Boys don't cry.

'Do want me to contact someone?'

'No, I have to do this myself,' I said.

Grandmother Shepherd was visiting my Aunty Ada and Uncle Bill at Bankstown and they had the phone on. I went down to the corner with tuppence and rang them.

It shook Gran. She was fairly old at this stage and she loved Mum. She wanted to help me but she was so far away.

'Robert, there are things that you shouldn't be expected to do but you are going to have to do them. You'll have to contact the doctor and a funeral director,' she answered.

I rang the funeral director in Hurstville from the corner phone and I also rang the doctor. After the doctor left, an ambulance came and took Mum away. She'd had a stroke and the doctor told me that if she'd lived, she would have been a vegetable.

I was only a kid but I had to sort it out because my father wasn't there. He'd gone up to North Queensland to build a factory for National Box, which had expanded and was going into pre-fabricated furniture and doors. He designed all the machines to cut the wood.

My sister couldn't because she was too busy with her baby and her husband.

When I thought about it, I'm sure Mum knew that she was going because she'd been doing strange things. My mother was a real stickler when it came to doing things. I found her Christmas cards. She'd addressed all the envelopes but left the insides of the cards blank to be filled in later. A week before she died, she'd handed out all our Christmas presents. It was strange because we never received or gave Christmas presents until Christmas day. I asked her why she'd done that and all she said was that she wanted to.

Then there was the incident on the Sunday before Mum died. It was Faye, my niece's, first birthday and Mum had set six places although there were only five of us for lunch.

'Do you realize that you've set one place too many?' I said.

'Yes that's for your Uncle Bill,' Mum replied.

I couldn't make it out. Uncle Bill had been dead for five years.

Now I realize that she must have been waiting for him to come and take her with him. I'm sure she knew.

By the time my father got back, the funeral was organized.

There was a church service at our local church. Mum loved gardenias and her coffin was covered with them. I couldn't stand gardenias for a long, long time after that.

Mum was cremated at Rookwood. I'll never forget that journey. Oatley to Rookwood seemed a long way that day as the funeral procession wound through the streets. Her ashes were placed in a memorial wall in Rookwood. The memorial wall was on the other side of Rookwood, away from the rest of the family graves. If I'd only known, I could have asked that the ashes be placed with the other family graves.

Mum was loved and respected by many people and we collected one hundred and thirty cards from the floral tributes at the church.

My niece, Faye, was twelve months old when Mum died. My sister and her husband, Bill, were living in Kogarah with one of Bill's aunts at the time but they came back to live with us. I couldn't cope.

At the funeral poor Gran Shepherd had said, 'I don't see you staying.'

'I can't', I answered.

I couldn't get along with my sister and her husband and it wasn't long before I moved out. My friend Trevor told me the best place to go was Kings Cross because I could get cheap accommodation there.

I believed then, as I do now, that if two people who live together are complete opposites and can't get along, then they've got to do something about it. They're simply not meant to be together.

It's like reaching a fork in the road. You've got to think what's good for everybody. If what you're doing isn't working, then you have to change direction. There's not much use in being unhappy.

You have to make your own path and you've got to be prepared to take a chance. I took a big chance at thirteen years old when I cut loose from home and moved to the Cross. It was a big leap but I don't regret it.

The Cross was new to me. I'd never been there before. I didn't know where to go or what to do. I was standing looking into a shop window at the Cross thinking of my next move when two smart well dressed guys, walked up to me. They were around twenty and they were out looking for a good time.

One of them said, 'How about it?'

I didn't know what he was talking about and just gave him a blank look.

'I suppose sex is really out of the question,' the other one butted in. 'How old are you anyway?'

I was glad he butted in because it saved me from the situation.

'Eighteen,' I answered.

I wasn't going to tell them I was only thirteen and besides, I was big for my age.

'Well come on. You look like you need some company anyway. Just ignore my friend. I'll buy you a drink,' he said.

I thought 'why not' so I went with them. I had no problems getting into the hotel. I had matured early and had two days growth of beard.

That's how I met my friend Roger. I stayed with him and shared his bed but there was no sex. I discovered that Roger was very clever and he had flair.

At the time I met him he was working in a florist shop and he was very artistic. He could speak French as well as Arabic.

Roger worked for a crime boss I simply called 'The Boss' and he became very important later on in the network.

I needed to live so Roger introduced me to his boss who offered me work as a male prostitute. I didn't mind and my homosexual experiences had been happy. I thought homosexual activity was normal for some people and I needed a job.

I was hopeless and I got fired. It was just a comedy of errors. There was no way that I could perform with someone I didn't want to perform with but those I did I'd fall madly in love with.

Someone reported back to the Boss and he called me into his office. He handed me twenty-five pounds and told me that I was fired.

I had nowhere to go and I'd always been told that you could always ask a cop.

When I was a little kid, our big trip out each week had been going to the major shops at Hurstville. It was when I was very young, just before the war and I wasn't old enough to go to school. My mother and grandmother used to go into Barters, where they bought materials to make our clothes. Mum was a seamstress and sewed as well as cooked, did the housekeeping and helped out other people.

If I got lost there, people would find a policeman and he'd buy me an ice cream.

Subconsciously I had this idea that you could always trust the police.

I was cold and I was hungry and I went up and asked this cop where I could go. It was the worst mistake I ever made.

'You'll be right,' he said, 'just jump into the back of the wagon and we'll go and find something for you.'

I could hear a few chuckles from the back of the wagon but I didn't take any notice. I climbed in and five hours later after being used by four big coppers, they threw me out. I was a mess.

I never trusted the cops ever again. That experience made me change my mind completely. I learnt it the hard way. I didn't know where to go but I knew the Boss had power to help me so I went to him. I was a terrible mess and had to be stitched up internally.

'Don't worry son, that sort of thing will never happen to you again,' he told me.

He warned them to stay away from me. I think that Roger had something to do with his decision because he was important in the organization.

When those cops saw me from then on they walked straight past me.

I think that in those days the cops were the ones who were the crooks. I used to watch them and Bumper Farrell

was the nastiest person I ever met.

He ran the girls on the street, the rough prostitution. The cops were the pimps and if the girls did the wrong thing, they were bashed up.

I was arrested three times after that incident for consorting with known criminals. I'd only been standing near them. They didn't take me to the station, they just hit me a couple of times and threw out the back of the van. I was never touched sexually again.

Roger told me that, if I didn't want to be a prostitute, I'd have to look around for some other job. I found a job at the coffee shop just down the road from where Roger had his florist shop. I went to this small coffee shop, the Kashmir, and asked them if they wanted a kitchen hand. They thought I was older and I got the job.

Later, when the old tarot reader in the coffee shop died, I asked them for her job. I told them that I could read tarot and that I'd been taught by the best: Grandma Sterio. She was a real Romani or gypsy. In fact she was the Queen of the Gypsies.

Grandma Sterio was grandma to a lot of people and I'm proud to say that she was my adopted gypsy grandmother. She had 'the sight', the ability to look into the past, present and future, using only the simplest of things to help.

Grandma Sterio had her tarot cards and a magnificent crystal ball. She was a true shuvani, a wise woman, because she favored the cards. To be able to divine, you've got to be psychic. Basically you don't need any of these 'tools'. You can do without them but they serve as a focal point to the person whose reading you are doing, where you can illustrate what has to be emphasized. It was Grandma Sterio who taught me about dukkerin' or fortune telling. She taught me about reading palms, cards and crystal gazing. I never got the hang of interpreting the actions of birds and animals like my Mum did, but Mum couldn't do what I did.

When you're reading, you've got a responsibility. The cards can tell the paths of life that a person can take and the consequences, but it is important for them to know that they have free will to change direction. The cards will warn if a person is at a delicate stage of emotional healing and that you have to be careful what you say. The cards may tell that the person is going to die but if the cards say not to tell them, then you don't.

At the Cross, I played the innocent but I understood more than most people gave me credit for.