



CHAPTER 1

Broaching the Subject

Brisbane, June 2012

My stomach churned as she spoke, all those odd words piercing the air, but I had always trusted her. Why should I stop now?

Mum slipped it out as smoothly as she glided past the black-and-white cat napping in the Queensland sun on one of our early morning walks. It was around my sixth birthday and a few months short of her change-inducing sixtieth. As if she hadn't accepted the possibility herself, she repeated and embellished the terms. She wanted a willing accomplice in her decision.

'A white Christmas! Wouldn't you love a traditional northern hemisphere white Christmas, Sidnie?'

Even with our interstate move to Brisbane after my formative years in our hometown of Sydney, little had changed in the way of Christmas. Azure skies wrapped around sparkling oceans and pearl-white beaches. High temperatures and oppressive humidity smothered the elongated days.

For Mum and Dad, creatures of gastronomic habit, Christmas ordained the quintessential refreshing lunch of

plump prawns and Balmain bugs from either Pyrmont Fish Market or Gambarro's in South Brisbane. They quaffed icy champagne, relaxed since Mum was on holidays from work. This familiar routine signalled all was well in my world.

Mum, short in height but large in opinion when provoked, usually spoke to me while we walked. At times it was to voice disgust at the dregs of an undigested meal on the footpath, or to instruct me to ignore an attractive morsel discarded at the foot of a tree trunk. Regularly it was to express her view on the latest political scandal or to turn 180 degrees and congratulate me on being so well toilet trained.

'Good boy, Sidnie,' accompanied most of my bodily functions, as if they required a higher order of intelligence, rather than feeling right at the time.

Every so often she revelled in the sun's warmth on her face or expressed a sadness clawing at her heart. At critical times, thoughts became words as she struggled with a more or less significant life decision. But her question, using my 'pay-attention-to-this' name, rather than her more conversational 'Treasure' or 'Precious' labels, required further explanation. From our time of near constant companionship, I knew more information would eventually follow.

In the meantime, we continued my daily highlight – our special time together walking along undulating, tree-lined Dornoch Terrace.

These outings usually proceeded in one of two ways. On work mornings, we set off at a cracking pace downhill towards the shady park that bordered the Brisbane River. Along the way, Mum often had to fend off the noisy grey-and-white Staffy that took sole ownership of the side-street short-

cut we occasionally used. Mum's protective custody persisted whenever the snarling brown Bulldog spied me. In the nick of time, his owner would clamp a leash onto his collar.

I knew Mum found these circumstances nerve-wracking by the tension vibrating down her arm, but I also knew I was safe by her side. And because this was our carved-out excursion in her busy day, she tolerated these episodes in the hope the Staffy would be barricaded behind his red rose-bordered picket fence, or that the Bully would miss a morning, which he regularly did.

Alternatively, on weekend mornings such as today, an al fresco breakfast followed a more leisurely walk. By the 7am opening we were seated at a table outside West End's Gunshop Café. Dad drove from home to meet us for a family meal. I lay at Mum's feet, the aroma of ricotta hotcakes topped with crispy bacon, floating in maple syrup, or creamy scrambled eggs accompanied by garlic mushrooms, sending my tastebuds into a slather.

Thankfully I wasn't excluded. Mum poured kibble into a collapsible rubber bowl, supplementing it with a crunchy piece of Vegemite-topped toasted sourdough. Well known to the friendly wait staff, Mum and Dad's cappuccino and latte followed a freshly filled water bowl.

I loved our family camaraderie. Living as we three now did, a state away from Mum's Sydney origins and daughters, and a continent and hemisphere away from Dad's brother, sister-in-law and stepkids, they were my world. Mum was my pack leader, with Dad her able reserve.

As proof, Dad and I shared a fun game. Every morning Mum was at work, he traipsed up the road to the German

bakery to buy a Danish pastry for his mid-morning snack. While he made his coffee, the goody ostensibly pushed far back on his desk, I easily managed a bite – or two. He never quite got the hang of ‘out of reach!’

But back to Mum’s bombshell.

Home and sated a few hours later, my long floppy ears ready to prick up at the next hint, I stretched across Mum’s lap in her light-filled study. My head lolled over one side of the low-slung velvet chair while my bottom danced precariously over the other. Mum’s hands intermittently hoisted my rear onto her leg or gently rubbed the black patches amidst the Berber fur along my generous back.

And thence it came – in a flood of marketing spiel not normally associated with Mum’s reserved personality, though her increasingly senior professional roles had required her to adopt a more outgoing style.

‘Sidnie, Dad and I are considering a move to America for a few years, where Christmas means cold and snow. Snow falls from the sky like powder, and it looks as if a fluffy white blanket has been draped on the ground and buildings.’

You see, Dad was an idiosyncrasy in Australia. He owned – and for several months a year single-handedly worked – a Christmas tree farm in north-east America. Accordingly, Mum added, ‘You will love it, Sidnie. Snow layers the Christmas trees on Dad’s farm, just like the icing on the pupcake you had on your birthday at Mandy’s.’

My stomach knotted just like Mum’s before a dental visit. Did she hear the twist as I did hers? But it wasn’t the concept of ‘snow’ that rattled me (although birthday parties at Mandy’s Day Care always aggravated my pancreatitis). ‘Move’ was the

culprit, reminding me of my scary journey from Sydney three years earlier, when Mum's love and work took us to Brisbane.



Sydney, July 2009

My anxiety began when, at three years old on a cold winter's morning, my extroverted dogsitter, Sally, and I squeezed into her friend's car, more the size of a Tonka toy than a real vehicle.

Sally was a livewire. Her usual job was to entertain and walk me on weekday afternoons when Mum was at work. Sally always wore a smile on her open, round face – a face archetypical of the next decade's emojis – and acted like a wound-up dynamo when she talked in her lilting voice.

'Sidnie, I'm here,' she sang, rousing me from my siesta on the brown leather lounge. 'It's time to go to the park and meet your friends.'

I feigned sleep. Her announcement really meant it's time for Sally to stand around and gossip with our neighbours while I endured mandatory meetings with their canine charges. For since puppyhood, rather than mingle with my own, I relished ambling along a route heavy with intriguing smells.

But there was no stopping Sally. She blared like the football commentators on the telly. I stretched and shook. The rattle of the heart-shaped name tag on my collar did nothing to disguise my whereabouts. Eventually I could no longer procrastinate.

After trotting beside her, I sat on the kerb, awaiting the finger command she insisted upon – although Mum never

caught onto the need to reinforce Sally's lessons. I darted across the road, optimistic about making a getaway from our so-called buddies, whose boring activities comprised chasing a ball or chasing each other.

I headed for secret scents at the base of the park's windswept trees and among the rabbit-warren of bushes, sniffing a wild fox that had made the eastern suburbs its home, and tracking the leftover scraps of last night's visitors. A drooping branch suggested a tall dog's message in need of further watering. I snuck towards the path, hoping for a solitary stroll. But when my leash locked onto my collar, a tug of war ensued, invariably culminating in us remaining anchored in a circle with the pack. From there, Sally maintained her reputation as hub central for all local happenings, and therein pursued a raft of rumours to their illuminating conclusion.

For the past two months, however, Sally had moved in as my babysitter while Mum led the advance party to join boyfriend Chris in muggy Brisbane. An Australian citizen for the past fifteen years, Chris's accent revealed Yankee origins. Set in his ways in his late sixties, he described himself as a bald, bowlegged codger and former cat lover.

But on that unusual day Sally crooned, 'Sidnie, you're about to have a wonderful adventure with a great surprise,' adopting the sales-pitch voice adults assume when you're about to go somewhere you wish you weren't.

As our long-haired, waxen driver waited immobile in his tiny red hatchback, Sally popped my black-sock front paws on the back seat and shoved my rear up onto it. Fortunately, I'm only a medium-sized dog, so Sally was able to hunch over and squeeze into the shell of a space next to me.

Now I've never been to the zoo. If I had, I would have recognised a cage – precisely into which Sally cajoled me when we stopped, distracting me unfairly with beef liver treats. Only the sight of my pink, nappy-sized eiderdown confirmed this contraption was meant for me. Suddenly its gate rattled shut!

I paced like a tiger in the oversize wire-mesh cell. Mouth dry, I blushed beneath my fur as I remembered the other lonely enclosure I'd been relegated to at the Spencers' in my birthplace of Bowral in the New South Wales Southern Highlands.

Sally slipped from sight as a man in patchy blue overalls heaved my cage onto a rattling trolley with a belly grunt that suggested I weighed more than my lean 14 kilos. I rolled jarringly across an expanse of glary concrete. Hoisted onto a moving slope and deposited in a claustrophobic space, I scanned the cavern, squinting as I tried to get my bearings. As I panted rapidly, my cage was shoved deeper into a plane's hold.

Outlines of large, stacked shapes were barely visible in the misty light. A low rumble shook the flooring and a firecracker-loud bang echoed as the door slammed closed, leaving me in darkness. As the growl morphed into a roar, the clapping of my heart rivalled my unrequited barks in force. I kept at it, though I knew I was alone.

When the noise abated to a muted hum, I yawned, relieving the heaviness in my ears. At last, my cage tipped and I sensed a finely tuned decrease in volume. But with shuddering thuds the sound returned to a crescendo. Finally, we clacked along solid ground until coming to a standstill.

With a sucking wheeze my ears popped, and the large door opened. A burst of light entered and moist air enveloped me like a soggy towel.

Relieved to see another man in blue overalls, I didn't know whether to bark with joy at my rescue or hide with shame at my puppyhood memories. But my angst abruptly ended as I spied Mum and Chris, soon formally to be my dad.

'Sidnielulu, here we are,' Mum called, using the name I associated with her cuddles.

Bursting from the cage, I threw myself into her arms. Had I known this jubilant welcome party was my reward for being isolated again, perhaps I could have coped with what I later learnt to be true cattle-class travel.



Brisbane, June 2012

With these memories still vivid, my emotions oscillated between separation anxiety and thoughts of euphoric reunions. I listened attentively to Mum's new angle on this plan.

'We will live on Dad's Christmas tree farm, my treasure. Many different animals roam across the enormous property, so you will have a smorgasbord of critters and tantalising smells to follow when we go for our walks.'

I searched my memory for conversations and clues as to what may have triggered this proposed revolution. 'Why turn us upside down and swap Christmas from hot to cold?' I whispered to myself.

Eventually I deduced that four distinct, yet significant events – some that had taken place even before my emergence

into the world – had now converged.

The first had stirred in the wind since early 2003, when Chris appeared on the scene, and Mum and Chris began their paced and patient relationship. At that time my predecessor, Mum's darling Bobbie, also a blue roan Cocker, was still alive. Bobbie was Mum's divorce therapist as she separated from her husband, Frank. Bobbie sensed her dispirited moods and let himself be squeezed and hugged as tears fell on his head. Although he loved the tall and solid, yet gentle Frank, he never judged decisions made around him.

When, at the age of twelve, Bobbie succumbed to fits and paralysis and Mum had to end his suffering, it was one of the worst days of her life. She nestled him in her arms, his body hot with fever although he lay on the cold metal table, the aroma of antiseptic overpowering the air around them. As his body relaxed with relief, a sole tear escaped from his eye. Mum kissed his head and wept with deep, raw grief.

Chris realised that Mum without a dog was like bread without butter. When she couldn't pass a dog without embracing it and when she was ready to give her heart again, at eight weeks of age I entered her life. I had Mount Everest to live up to, but soon I became Mum's treasure, as she became mine.

Chris and Mum's relationship also strengthened. After seven years of toing and froing and driving and flying between Sydney and Brisbane, they huddled in a romantic little pizza restaurant in Yamba. Over their favourite double pepperoni and a bottle of Shiraz, they decided to get married. The wedding date was set for 2 January 2010, to be held in Brisbane, where Mum had won a new job.

Their wedding was a joyous affair. Mum worried that relatives and friends would be offended at being excluded, but a small gathering suited their private life north of the Tweed. The guest list was confined to Mum's daughters, Ilana and Abby, Ilana's fiancé Mark, Chris's stepson Pascal – the sometimes Australian arm of his five American stepchildren – Pascal's wife Sandi and, of course, yours truly.

Held in Dad's eighteenth-floor penthouse, the city's high-rise hub, an expanse of sprawling suburbs and the snake-like Brisbane River extended before us. Mum was radiant in a black-and-cream lace Dolce and Gabbana dress from Harrod's, with gossamer butterflies appliqued on her neckline. Dad was handsome in his tux, capped off with a Christmas tree-patterned bow tie, a prescient gift from Mum early in their courtship.

This event triggered speculation about an eventual move to New Jersey. The contrast from highly urban to languid rural, from breaking waves to meandering canal – indeed, from sunshine to snowscape – was attractive to a couple that thrived on change in their careers. They agreed that this shift would not occur while Sapta (my, Ilana and Abby's grandmother) was still alive, and only after Mum retired.

Sapta, in her nineties, a grey-haired, roly-poly, in contrast to the svelte hour-glass of bygone years, lived in a Sydney nursing home. She had been there a while by now, since her husband Zeida had passed away, becoming frailer as congestive heart failure and dementia took their toll.

'Mum recognised me, mainly by my voice, and loved the ham roll I snuck in,' Mum told Dad on her return to Brisbane from one of her weekend visits. Sneaking a ham roll into the

Kosher facility always gave Mum and Dad a nervous chuckle – but it was amazing how Sapta asked for it every visit. They wouldn't deny her. With a wry smile, Sapta chewed the treat surreptitiously, her hands wrapped around the embargoed goods.

Sapta had her first stroke in late 2009 and another in May 2010. Able to eat only pureed food, a main joy in life was ripped from her. Mum was therefore not surprised to be called and told to rush to Sydney. She jumped on a plane, the guilt at not having spent more time with Sapta pounding in her chest.

The sensitive and gentle caregivers advised Mum it was time to let Sapta go, but she was torn between losing her mother and seeing her in peace. Yet, with Sapta semi-conscious for several doubt-ridden days, Mum caressed and kissed Sapta's warm, dry forehead and whispered words of release. A tear formed in the corner of Sapta's eye and slid down her cheek. The moment was so inexplicably akin to Bobbie's farewell, Mum could almost not believe what she saw, let alone share it, fearful of being accused of minimising her mother's death.

A year after this heartbreak, the second event in our seemingly preordained move, the third followed when Dad failed his annual stress test. Urgent heart surgery was required and within two weeks, he underwent a quadruple bypass. When he was granted another gift of life, following a heart attack several years earlier, Mum and Dad resolved to seriously consider their future.

They didn't wait long for the fourth and final piece of the puzzle to fall into place. Mum's Brisbane job, to ensure water

security for South East Queensland, had developed out of the drought affecting much of Australia in the early 2000s. The Queensland Government had spent billions of dollars on infrastructure to mitigate the risk of running out of water. And everyone else paid mightily for the privilege of running taps.

In January 2011, six months after Mum took up her role, the unexpected happened. Rain fell so heavily that Brisbane and much of South East Queensland flooded. Expecting the community to pay higher water prices in a time of water aplenty was not a viable government position. When in early 2012 the Liberal Nationals rode to power on the promise of lower water prices, they proposed closing Mum's organisation as part payment for the currently unnecessary drought-proofing infrastructure.

And so, with Mum's job on a slippery slope to oblivion, she and Dad determined the time as nigh. It was the moment to realise their vision of living in America.

Being the typical Libran she was, once Mum signed onto an 'on-balance' decision – it was all systems go. Following, in my view, undue haste in having a vet-certified rabies injection, I held the canine equivalent of a United States visa.

I would soon be on my way!