

**STEP**  
*by*  
**STEP**

## *AUTHOR'S NOTE*

This is my story and it is written from my own perspective on the events identified. Some names and places have been changed to protect privacy.



# *PROLOGUE*



# *FIRE*

**M**y name is Linda Buchan. I was eighteen when I died.

It was a winter's day, Saturday, 27 June 1998. The day my young life ended and my new life began; a life that was to be so completely different to the one I had envisaged.

My sister, Kim, and I were both trapped in a catastrophic house fire in Sydney's Neutral Bay. When I was pulled from the building, paramedics worked frantically for ten minutes to revive me, but Kim, who was trapped in the house for longer than me, couldn't be resuscitated.

That weekend was meant to be special. It was my best friend, Jules', eighteenth birthday and she'd organised a party. Kim, who was a boarder at my old school, had arranged to stay with me on the Friday night so that she could play in an important netball game the next morning, after which she planned on catching the train home to Wagga Wagga (in rural New South Wales).

I couldn't wait for Friday to pass, for the weekend to start. I was spending my gap year as a receptionist in an insurance broker's office and I remember how quickly I locked up the office at the end of the day and eagerly drove to Ravenswood School for Girls to collect Kim. It was the end of the school term and I knew how much she would be looking forward to it.

It was raining when I pulled up to the school gates and as I ran to Kim's dormitory she came bouncing down the corridor, squealing with excitement, to give me a big hug.

She couldn't wait to see my place and was keen to know if my flatmates, Naomi and Andrew, would be home. When we arrived home they were relaxing after work, their overnight bags packed ready for their weekend away. They greeted Kim with hugs and smiles, as if she was an old friend.

'You can have my room,' Naomi offered.

Giving Kim the grand tour upstairs we bumped into my other flatmate, Josh, who had only moved in a couple of months before.

'You remember my little sister, Kim?' I asked him.

'Of course, who could forget?' he replied, flatteringly.

Josh suggested getting sushi together, but then his phone rang with a different offer.

'Okay mate,' I heard him say, 'I'll see if she wants to come, see you there.'

He turned to me and asked if I wanted to meet up with friends for a drink at a bar on Oxford Street, a popular ‘in-place’ in Sydney.

At first, I said no, I just wanted to hang out with Kim but she loved to party and have fun as much as I did and urged me to go. She insisted that she’d be fine.

The night went off as usual, fun and noisy. I loved to socialise and party and really enjoyed meeting new people from different walks of life. However, I also had a netball game to play the next morning, so I decided to leave reasonably early. I quietly slipped out of the bar and found a cab to take me home.

Once I had paid the cab driver, I remembered that Kim had my house key. I didn’t want to wake her ahead of her important game so I decided to find another way into the house.

The first-floor balcony door was always left open and I knew that was my way in. Even though I was an able-bodied, fit young woman, I gingerly climbed the two-metre brushwood fence. Once I was over, I took off the black trousers I had borrowed from Naomi, as I didn’t want to ruin them. After neatly folding them I left them nearby to collect the next morning. Then, it was back on top of the fence, onto the balcony and into Andrew’s room.

Once in my room across the hall, I changed into my PJs, turned the heater on to take the chill out of the air and hopped into bed.

Back at the bar, Josh noticed that I was missing. Deciding that he'd been at the bar long enough, he jumped in a cab with his mate Jason and went back to Neutral Bay. He said, after the accident, that he'd wanted to make sure I was okay.

As their cab turned into our street, Jason was the first to notice the fire.

'Mate, isn't that where you live?' he asked.

Josh said he saw brilliant bright red and orange flames licking the outside walls of the house and thick black smoke billowing from the upstairs windows.

'Holy shit, that's my place,' Josh remembers yelling and as the cab screeched to a halt. It was as if he went into overdrive.

'I didn't have time to think,' he said later. He told me how he kicked the front door down to get in and was met with a wall of thick, choking smoke. As he entered the house he immediately felt the intense heat of the fire.

Josh said he didn't give a second thought to his own safety, nor was he trying to be a hero. For him, his actions were powered by instinct.

Not knowing what he would find, and oblivious to the angry flames that had enveloped the floor above the entrance hall, he bounded up the stairs two at a time to where the dense black smoke was already leaving its ugly marks on the white walls. On the first floor the flames were glowing with a frightening strength and intensity.

Josh somehow found his way to my room and remembers calling out my name while choking on the heavy smoke as it invaded his lungs. Desperately he moved along the corridor and saw the flames and embers of what he later learned was burning material. Blinded by smoke, he dropped to his knees, groped his way around and found my unconscious body.

Picking me up, he scrambled down the stairs as best he could to where Jason was waiting. He laid me down on the nature strip where they checked my vital signs. He knew that he had to try and rescue Kim too and so he rushed back through the front door.

Inside the house he stumbled into Naomi's room but couldn't find Kim. Overcome by smoke, he staggered back downstairs, took another deep breath and then raced back into the house for a third time. He searched another room but couldn't penetrate the deadly smoke, and as he reeled, choking, back down the stairs, he was grabbed by a fireman who took him outside.

Reluctantly, he left the next moves to the fire brigade officers and waited and watched. Eventually the firemen found Kim, who apparently had managed to get out of bed and, in an attempt to escape the flames and smoke, had crawled under it.

Josh said the harrowing scene had lasted no longer than ten minutes; from the time the cab pulled up to the house, to when Kim was brought out. But they were the longest few minutes of his life.

He watched on as paramedics frantically tried to find my pulse. He watched my body shut down, like watching the lights go out.

I have never been able to put 'it' into words, but I always knew that I was coming back. I knew I wouldn't die.

In the weeks, months and years that followed I was often stricken with pain (physical and emotional), sadness, despair, distress and heartbreak but I never for one moment thought about not going on. I didn't know where it came from, I still don't, come to that. But I always had hope: I knew that not only would I survive but that life would get better.

PART ONE

*BEFORE*



# 1

## *FAMILY LIFE*

**I**t's forty degrees at 3.30pm, a boiling hot, dry heat that leaves perspiration beading down the back of my neck.

'Hurry up, Linda,' Kim yells over her shoulder as she races up the hill towards home after a long school day. She was always faster than me, it seemed so easy for her.

Our house sits on the highest hill in Wagga, giving us spectacular views across the beautiful district, including views of the Murrumbidgee River as it meanders through town and across the landscape.

I turn to see where our little brother John is.

'Kim, I'll see you in the pool. I'll wait for John,' I say.

Once home, we drop our school bags on the back lawn, leaving a trail of clothes behind us, and dive into the cool, clean, fresh water. Splash! Water goes everywhere as John bombs the water. Mum and Kim are already there, cooling off on the hot afternoon.

Splashing around in the pool was a favourite activity of ours, and the best way to combat the scorching heat. Our pool was surrounded on two sides by dense bush so you couldn't see where civilisation ended and the never-ending countryside began. Dry sparse earth, covered in low mustard-coloured twiggy-like vegetation stretched into the distance.

As usual, before we knew it, our fingers had become wrinkly and prune-like, hours had passed by and it was time to climb out of the pool and get ready for dinner.

Meals times were usually the five of us, plus my Nan and her husband Petey who lived next door. She was a fantastic cook and I was a great eater so it was little wonder we were very close.

We had an intercom system in our kitchen that linked the two houses at the press of a button. It was a very convenient way of talking to Nan without having to walk up the hill, even if her house was only a few metres away.

When I was three years old, I apparently asked Mum what was for dinner.

'Sausages, mash potato and peas,' I was told.

'Hmm,' I said to myself, and with that I dragged a chair from the dining table through to the big kitchen, climbed up on the chair and 'buzzed' Nan.

'Nan, what are you having for dinner?'

She told me, but as I climbed down off the chair I was spotted by Mum who hurried over to help me down.

‘What were you doing up there?’ she asked.

‘I don’t want sausages for dinner. Nan is having pancakes so I’m going to Nan’s,’ I announced.

‘Okay, see you,’ Mum replied. She knew better than to forbid me from going next door for something to eat.

We were a typical Australian family in many ways and lived in an ‘ordinary’ family home. Mum and Dad owned a local newsagency and also had an interest in a taxi business. Kim and I shared a huge room at the back of the house, overlooking the backyard. It was definitely a room for little girls with walls painted in a soft pink, Kim’s favourite. Barbie stuff could always be found scattered across the room – a little sparkly high heel under the bed, a miniskirt on the windowsill.

Our twin beds were always neatly made with pretty floral quilts, with our Pound Puppies sitting on top, guarding our beds.

It was our domain.

We also relished romping around outdoors. The three of us kids would play on the hill for hours; building cubby houses, playing in neighbours’ gardens, and kicking the footy up, down and across the street.

We often left Mum and Dad alarmed at our antics, particularly those involving riding our bikes or the

daredevil feats we devised – leaping off various obstacles and skylarking in the pool.

Petey, who owned a farm, occasionally got us a tractor tube (the lining from inside big farm machinery tyres). We would secure it with occy straps to the dark green pool fence in one corner of the pool at the deep end – it made for a great trampoline to backflip off into the refreshing water.

Mum said that wherever we were, there was always noise, yells of delight and howls of laughter. According to my dad we were lively, almost wild, children but never unmanageable, although he did say that I could get a bit stroppy if I didn't get my own way.

The local policeman was a good mate of Dad's so providing we didn't totally misbehave then there was no trouble. Sometimes we would pass him the football through the window of his police car as he did his routine patrol.

Blue, the family Blue Heeler, was big part of the family. He was a sudden addition, though. One day he followed Dad's ute home and just stayed. Dad didn't realise he was being followed, at first, but when he did spot Blue in his mirror he assumed that he would give up the chase at some point along the road. However, Blue followed the ute all through the streets of central Wagga Wagga, up the hill, and right to our front gate where he sat panting.

We, of course, immediately wanted to adopt him but our parents insisted on trying to find out who

owned him. Mum ran an ad for a couple of weeks in the local paper, but the days passed and there was still no word from his owner. We became more attached to Blue as every day passed. He had every opportunity to leave of his own free will, but he never did. It was obvious he had found his home. He became our protector.

John wandered off alone one day. It was getting dark and the rule was always that we had to be home by nightfall. Mum started to worry. She whistled and called for Blue, who appeared on the street a few houses up, tail wagging madly and dripping wet. Mum, Kim and I walked up to the house where Blue had emerged from and there was John, in the neighbour's yard, with their garden hose turned on full pelt, twirling it to make circles in the air as Blue snapped at the splashes of water.

Our parents encouraged us to play sports, so any that we were interested in, we were allowed to take part in. Sundays were often spent at a sporting carnival somewhere in the Riverina region: anywhere from Tumut, Cootamundra, Young and other surrounding towns.

My sister and I played the same sports and we always seemed to end up in the same team, even though she was two years younger than me. I think the selectors saw that we made an unbeatable combination, especially when it came to netball.

We played in the top division in the schools' competition and Mum was our coach. She was tough on us and definitely showed no favouritism, especially in practice.

One such practice session, the last before semi-finals, Kim and I were mucking around together. Mum instructed the team on a drill: a set play we would use against our opponents at the weekend. Kim and I nailed it first go, and whilst the rest of the team practised, we decided to try some innovative moves of our own.

'Linda! Kim! Back fence: go!' we heard our mum/coach bark at us.

She didn't even look at us, her focus was on the rest of the team. Obviously, we were distracting her, and others, with our giggling and shouting.

The boundary of our school backed on to the railway tracks where the XPT train ran from Sydney to Melbourne. This was where we were told to go. We took off, jogging beside one another, giggling and generally mucking around. On the way we pushed each other sideways trying to trip each other up as we ran past the old run-down cement tennis court. One of us was going to come off second best.

Kim stuck her foot out at the perfect time. I tripped, falling onto the hard ground. Kim ran on but I reached out and managed to tap her heel so she too hit the ground. We proceeded to roll around, giggling, trying to pin the other one down.

‘Oi, you two!’ Mum yelled. ‘Touch the fence and get back here. Quick!’

Hands on her hips she watched us right back to where the team was gathered. She wasn’t impressed.

One weekend the country swimming championships were held an hour away, in Young. This sort of outing was no simple task. Just getting into the car was hard. Mum held one side of the large red Esky with its white wide lid and Dad grabbed the other side while with their free hand they each carried a collapsible chair. We three children followed closely behind with big, cumbersome, over-packed swimming bags slung over our shoulders.

The car was crammed to the roof by the time we drove off, but of course, if possible, Blue came with us. He usually managed find a spot somewhere.

Once in Young, it was straight up the path, through the turnstiles and into the pool area to where our yellow and blue club tent stood, with its cartoon crow character in the middle of the canopy sides.

By this stage, I was in a competitive frame of mind. No more mucking about. I dropped my bag in a corner of the protective shelter, slipped my club clothes off, revealing my official blue and yellow one-piece racing swimmers.

‘I’m going to warm up,’ I said, handing one side of my swimming cap to Mum. Grabbing the other side and positioning it on the front of my hairline, Mum

pulled the rest of the cap over my head as I tucked the remaining strands of hair into it.

‘What about your ear plugs?’ she called after me.

By this time the adrenalin had kicked in. I was hyped for another swimming meet. It was serious stuff but, win or lose, I enjoyed it.

That meet in Young was one of the most successful I ever took part in. I qualified for the New South Wales championships in all events except breaststroke.

After each event I went back to the team area and ate. There was always plenty of energy food and I didn’t need to be asked twice to eat my share of sandwiches, fruit and sugary treats.

If we weren’t at sport on a Sunday, then there was always a barbeque in our backyard with Nan’s friends, especially in the summer months. Everyone brought along their favourite meat, a bottle of wine and a handful of beers. Each of the ladies had their own specialty dish that they would also bring to share: curried eggs, potato salad, lemon meringue pie. The delicious dishes were arranged in the middle of the dark wooden outdoor table, spread out like a veritable feast.

Growing up with Nan’s friends around was like having six sets of doting grandparents. Kim, John and I always ended up sitting between different people, and were definitely fussed over. I would chat with each of my ‘adopted grandparents’ who always seemed to love hearing about what I was up to.

I didn't really know it then but we were blessed. I was part of a loving, caring family. My sister, brother and I led what can only be described as an idyllic life against the backdrop of the spacious countryside that gave us a feeling of freedom.

