

*There has been one catastrophe after the other. Hannah was unable to find the meaning to her suffering. Her dreams are shattered by her husband's betrayal. Her weapon of faith fought back against the turmoil around her.*

## **Breathe: Run Your Race**

By Sahara Stafford

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# BREATHE RUN YOUR RACE

Based on a true story



SAHARA STAFFORD

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## 4

**A**fter having a large breakfast prepared by the staff, we were off to view the bridge construction site as planned. Indeed, it was as impressive and spectacular as they claimed. The structure looked firm, presenting plenty of safety features. It was an amazing experience to walk over freely with the sound of water flowing below. We strolled to the end of the bridge to get a full view. At the same time, we took in the unlimited beautiful picture of the hills before us. There were lots of people walking, while others were riding bikes. I must say it felt safe being on the bridge; in addition, it was well worth the effort. The bridge filled up with other people who had the same idea as we did.

We stopped from time to time to dip our legs in the water as we walked alongside the river. When we were tired of walking, as well as visiting our favourite childhood spots, it was past midday. We found our preferred private position alongside the river, a short distance away from the bridge. We unpacked our picnic baskets that were prepared for us. We were still keyed up as we all commented on the progress of the bridge. The sound of the calming waters flowing in the river, along with the river eventually having a bridge over it, was pleasing. We stayed on at the site for about three hours and made friends with some of the other holidaymakers as we began discussing the bridge, as well as other general matters.

Eventually, my elder sister Geraldine, Megan, and I went back to the farmhouse to start dinner. We preferred to take a slow walk back. Stephanie; her husband, William; and her sons, Aaron and Cooper, together with Renaldo, my elder sister's son, and Megan's sons, Steven and Ricardo, came too.

Some of the younger generation stayed behind to explore further. They walked along the river's edge and caught some fish. They were not in the least bit ready to go back to the house. Despite the fact that it was winter, the day was warm, and the air was refreshing. There was nothing to change about the day at that moment, as it had turned out to be perfect.

Halfway back to the farmhouse, a man passing by on a tractor trailer stopped to offer us a lift. We were only too glad to accept and climbed onto the trailer, as we were tired from walking for over an hour, and most of the rest of the way was uphill. The kids began to question the safety of the ride, but we convinced them that nothing could possibly go wrong, as this was a small town where everyone knew each other.

We happened to be riding for ten minutes when we heard an unfamiliar grinding noise coming from the engine, like it wanted to stall.

As we got to a steep hill, it stopped. We all waited in anticipation, as the trailer started to roll backwards.

'Something is wrong,' I heard Renaldo announce anxiously.

I was sitting towards the edge of the trailer. I was unable to move forward. As I looked towards the front, I shuddered, sensing that we were in a lot of trouble. I saw smoke coming from the engine. A sudden wave of anxiety attacked me. Every worst possible situation started playing out in my head. Is what I am thinking really about to happen?

By now, the tractor was out of control, making a loud bang as it struck something hard; instead of moving forwards, it continued to move backwards at a rapid speed. A stone that was flung into the air by the wheels hit hard against the side of the tractor, making a deafening sound. Below us was a very steep hill. I started panicking as I looked down that hill. I knew then that we were in great danger and that our lives were at risk.

‘Stay calm,’ someone whispered.

‘It’s going to be okay,’ someone else reassured us.

It did not seem that way to me. All I saw was my life flashing by before me. I saw the driver wrestle with the big green machine as he was turning the steering wheel in all directions, but the tractor just kept on moving backwards, gathering more speed. The driver managed to stop the tractor from going down the hill by swerving it in the opposite direction. There was a lot of shouting and screaming. I knew something was wrong when I heard all the noise. The tractor came to a standstill.

How could this happen on such a calm road, where we were the only vehicle for miles? It never for one minute occurred to me that we would find ourselves in such a horrific situation, in a village surrounded by solitude, with trees and flowers growing everywhere – a place where the houses were so far apart, there were hardly any cars in sight. How was it possible for an accident to take place in such an isolated location where you seldom see people passing by? Sadly, this was one of those unforeseen freak accidents, an unwanted incident that made me feel powerless to the unexpected traumatic tragedy befalling us.

The last thing I remembered was telling Megan to grab hold of my six-year-old grandson, Aaron. By the time I saw

him sliding towards the edge of the trailer, it was already too late to grab him.

I could not reach him. I panicked, as no one was close to him. It all happened so fast.

‘Please save him from falling over!’ were my last words before I was flung off the back of the tractor’s trailer.

I was thrown hard against a rock. I lost consciousness for a short time. When I awoke, I was trapped under the huge back wheel of the tractor, lying face up. I heard Ricardo ask if everyone was safe. The wheel had pinned me to the ground. I was unable to move. I tried to move my head, but I felt a sharp object shift from under the back of my head as if it pierced into my skull. *It must be a stone*, I thought.

‘Where is Hannah?’ I heard Renaldo’s voice at a distance.

Then someone spotted me under the wheel of the tractor. In the midst of my terror, I remember seeing a vision of the gypsy women. I shut my eyes as tightly as I could. Was this the accident they had predicted? There was silence all around as everyone rushed to my side and started assessing my injuries, trying to find a solution on how to get me out from under the big back wheel. There was confusion as everyone tried to offer his or her ideas on how to safely move me out. There was no mistaking the fear in Stephanie and Robyn’s voices as they began to scream hysterically when they spotted me.

‘Be silent and stop that screaming. You are going to make your mother panic!’ I heard Megan’s voice command – as if I was not panicking already.

It was then that I observed that I was in big trouble. I could not feel my lower body. I was having difficulty concentrating.

‘Take this thing off me!’ I screamed at them.

At this stage my body became numb. I was shivering uncontrollably. For an instant, fear spurted through my body as I realised that I could not move my leg, let alone straighten it.

‘Help me,’ I whispered again. ‘Get this thing off me.’”

Someone took control of the wheel. They managed to start the tractor and drove it off my body. The tractor suddenly started like there was nothing wrong with it. Worst mistake – my body was spun as the wheel skidded off me, taking with it my flesh. There was blood all over.

I could not move at all. I must have slipped into an unconscious state again because, when I opened my eyes, I heard new voices. My body was facing downwards like I’d been turned around.

‘We are going to look for help.’ I heard the unfamiliar voices coming through as an echo in the background. I suspected that it was the driver and his friend. We expected some assistance from them, but no one returned. We later assumed that they had seen the severity of the accident and had made a decision to make a run for it. My uneasiness intensified as I heard someone trying to evaluate the damage to my leg.

‘The flesh on Hannah’s leg is shredded and pieces of flesh have been torn from her thigh. Her leg is seriously wounded.’

The rest of the family was notified. They arrived onto the scene. When I opened my eyes and turned my head, I saw terror in their eyes. Something told me that it was worse than I thought.

‘The hospital is like three hours away. The ambulance could take up to four hours before it arrives. Hannah’s leg does not look good at all!’ I heard someone exclaim.



'Hannah is losing blood. We need to act fast and get her to a hospital right away,' said a voice almost in a whisper.

I could not identify any of the people who were speaking. I was petrified as my unmoving body lay at the side of the road trembling with fear. Darkness kept threatening to dominate my senses. My whole body was on fire and was aching like hell.

My family managed to take the seats out of the bus and straightened my leg, easing me onto a home-made stretcher. They laid it flat on the floor of the minibus and then covered me with a blanket. We drove to the nearest town, where we stopped a passing ambulance that was transporting other patients and was going in the opposite direction. They could not help me much, but they did manage to give me morphine for the pain.

Despite being wrapped in a blanket, I was freezing cold and close to tears from the pain. I could feel that my eyes wanted to close; my body was shaking. I just lay there. I could not breathe. The pain shot across my body. *Why me?* I kept asking over and over in my head.

I tried to explain my terror to my sisters, but I also avoided asking how badly my leg was injured, as I did not want to know the extent of my injury at that point.

Geraldine consoled me by declaring that I was a brave person and that I will pull through. Her words did not sound encouraging to me at that particular point. I could not move. Megan told me to close my eyes and concentrate on my breathing but, at the same time, advised me not to fall asleep. How was I supposed to do that? Both my sisters were at the back of the bus with me, doing everything in their power to comfort me. They kept talking to me and gave me water to drink to keep me awake.

‘Are you still awake?’ whispered Geraldine.

I nodded, unable to speak. I was more aware of the pain in my leg and my back. I moaned in agony. I was getting weaker by the minute. The damage seemed to be more extensive than I believed it to be, as the slightest movement caused me great discomfort. It was an effort to move my body, so I stayed confined to the same sleeping position. My head was pounding, like it was about to explode.

Anthony drove the bus like he was on a racetrack. There was silence as the bus moved forward at an unknown speed, swallowing the kilometers by the minute.

Each time I fell asleep, my sisters gave me a gentle slap in the face to keep me awake. ‘Come on now. You cannot sleep. You need to stay awake.’

At one stage, I heard a funny noise coming from the back of the bus. Despite the state that I was in, I asked them to stop to check the back wheel. Anthony pulled off to the side of the road to inspect the wheel.

‘We will make it. Nothing major wrong,’ I heard Anthony say softly, notifying the co-driver.

It was already night-time when we entered the city. I opened my eyes to see where we were. The lights seemed to have an extra glow, which almost blinded me, while the sound of the cars seemed louder and more deafening than usual. The noise was screaming in my head unlike anything I’d ever heard before. As we passed the tall buildings, they appeared as giants transforming their shapes as they moved about. Maybe I was beginning to hallucinate, as I was feeling feverish and shaky. Suddenly, I became very anxious, not knowing what was happening to me.

We eventually reached the hospital in less than two hours flat. The paramedics rushed to the bus. They lifted me to make me walk. The pain shot through my body like fire. They placed me back in the bus as fast as they had lifted me when they became aware of the severity of the injuries to my leg. I heard one of the paramedics call out for help, stating that I could not walk.

I was strapped on to a stretcher by two medics and then taken to the emergency room. It did not surprise me that I could not walk, as I was unable to feel my limbs. All at once, I was wide awake. I started to panic. I was trembling and experiencing extreme shaking and breathlessness. I uttered a desperate prayer in my heart. I heard many concerned voices. I was afraid as the pain intensified and my anxiety increased. There was a sharp stinging coming from my leg and lower back. It became unbearable as it sliced through my body when they lifted me off the stretcher. I heard one of the nurses in casualty state that my tracksuit was stuck to the flesh of my leg and that they needed to cut the tracksuit pants off. The doctors and nurses were rushing all around me, giving each other instructions. I continued to pray as I held onto my life.

'I am sorry, but you need to leave the room immediately,' the doctor informed my family as he examined me. He looked at them intently and went on to say, 'If you know how to say the *Our Father*, I suggest that you say a lot of them. If you know any other prayers, say them, because she will need them.' Then he continued to administer treatment to me.

*What exactly did he mean by that? Why would a doctor make such a statement? I must be in a very critical condition. This must be a mistake. It wasn't supposed to happen like this. But I am alive for now, I reminded myself.*

I heard the doctor telling the nurse that I was to be put into a forced coma. I could not grasp the meaning of anyone's words. My thoughts were confused as I had the last flashback of the tractor before my eyes. I could not come to grips with what was happening.

I could not formulate any answers to any of the questions that surfaced to my mind. Maybe some form of shift was about to take place. I imagined myself to be back home sitting in my backyard.

Those were my last thoughts as I drifted into a deep sleep. I was swept away by a calm current, which carried me to the shore. Everything before me began to fade. It became dark as if my brain function was shutting down. All that was taking place around me was beyond my understanding.

## 10

**I**t was time to unplug myself from the pressure I was going through, and enjoy a small holiday break. It was time to self soothe, and there was no better way to do that than to spend some time at the beach and move away from the experiences of the past few days by putting them behind me. It was the perfect time to de-stress and have a dose of sun. We could spend uninterrupted time together. Maybe this would cheer us up and melt away some of our problems.

'How about another small vacation; maybe we can go to the beach and spend some time together?' I insisted to Anthony on his weekend visit home.

The last holiday we had taken together was before my accident. That weekend had turned out to be a disaster, with us arguing the whole time. He showed anger to everyone throughout the holiday by snapping at the waiters in the restaurant for no apparent reason.

I tried to block out his previous behaviour and continued to make the arrangements for a small break. I was hoping that this trip would turn out differently. This would be a good opportunity for us to reconnect. I was feeling very pleased with the idea, but he seemed uninterested. I ignored his attitude and went ahead with my plans. I found suitable accommodation.

'Maybe we could work on our marriage. Who knows? This break might do us the world of good.' I smiled encouragingly at him.

He just nodded in agreement.

Filled with anticipation, I began to pack for our weekend vacation. I was hopeful that the time we spent together on holiday could possibly bridge the gap that developed between us, and we might grow close again. It was not easy to admit that things were not going well in our marriage, but for now I wanted to get our relationship back on track, as well as to engage in working through the major issues that were weighing our marriage down.

We set out on our journey in the early hours of Friday morning. The weather was cool, with an early morning mist in the air. The drive was tedious, as we hardly uttered a word to each other. I attempted on numerous occasions to make conversation, but every time I was met with one-word answers. The silence between us was smothering.

At the halfway stop, he spent the entire time on his phone, avoiding contact with me, pretending that I did not exist.

'Who are you speaking to?' I asked him curiously.

'It's work related,' he mumbled under his breath.

I didn't believe him. We continued the journey in silence. *Why do I feel like I wasted my time taking this trip? Why did I even think that this holiday would be different from the other vacations we embarked on?* I wondered regretfully.

A couple of hours later, we reached our holiday venue, and then I began to unpack. Once again, he was glued to his phone. As hard as I tried to overlook our situation, it was impossible to disregard.

'Look, I did not come all this way to watch you spend the entire time on your phone. If this is the way it's going to be,

we might as well pack up and go back home,' I snapped at him furiously.

He just gave me an indifferent look and pocketed his phone. By now, my heart was pounding with anger. I watched as all the planning, together with the money spent for the vacation, went up in smoke. No sooner than we arrived at what was supposed to be a happy event, I instead wanted to go back home.

I perceived this trip to be an obligation to him, rather than a chance for us to spend quality time together, as it was obvious that we were not alone. Our meals were taken in silence. His best friend was his phone. He spent hours texting her while I was lying next to him in bed. Everything we did together seemed to be a painful effort for him. He struggled to put on an act of happiness.

Most of the vacation was spent either arguing with or ignoring each other. Our walk on the beach was a disaster, with me walking slightly ahead of him. The escapade turned out to be a waste of time. I desperately wanted to get away from him to find time to clear my mind. The effort I made to try and salvage our marriage was not agreed to in good faith on his side.

The only conclusion I could draw from here was that our marriage was over. It was so easy to miss the obvious. I was striving for something that no longer existed. The love was gone. He was in love, but clearly it was not with me. There was a third party in our relationship that was tearing me down. It was me against them. His actions revealed his intentions with this other woman, and she was always in the wings of our marriage, like a shadow that refused to go away. The love we'd once shared disappeared without the possibility of revival. I was more upset than I let on.

It was time to face the hard truth and stop deceiving myself by pretending all was normal. I was not prepared to be a second choice for anyone.

I was relieved that we were going home the next day. I'd had enough of hiding from the truth. I was fooling myself and came to the conclusion that I was no longer happy. We achieved absolutely nothing by being together; instead, the holiday took an ominous turn. Failure weighed heavily on my shoulders. I don't know which felt worse—failure of the marriage or my loss of self-respect for pursuing the marriage. A distance grew between us that threw us a million miles apart. I was very happy when we reached home.

I started to unpack at once. I kept a smile on my face, in the hope that the children would not detect that anything was amiss, as I knew they might soak up the discomfort and become insecure.

I undressed, showered, and lay awake staring at the ceiling for hours. This seemed to be the role I played every night. The ceiling seemed to be my big flat screen. My body was exhausted due to lack of sleep. I began taking sleeping tablets just to get some rest.

*No more!* I thought to myself. My day of reckoning had come. It was my moment to get to the bottom of the problem. I made my choice to address our situation with Anthony. He gave me a cynical look, insisting that he did not notice anything different in our marriage. Nothing had changed as far as he was concerned. He sounded like an accomplished liar, looking at me straight in the face, challenging my loyalty.

I was outraged by his response and looked at him in disbelief. It was hopeless to pursue the topic further or ask any more questions because he would deny the matter



anyway. I'm not sure how he viewed our situation as being okay or even that nothing changed.

He created his own world of fantasy. I was on the outside. Once fooled was more than enough for me, but twice fooled was definitely a shame on me. I was done with pretending that our marriage was on track, because it was not. I was fired up. It was time to stand up for myself, time to snoop around his possessions and get out of this mess and find out the truth.

While he was taking a shower, I took the opportunity of browsing through his phone. My heart was pumping, and my hands were clammy as I began to glance through his messages. There it was, all the evidence staring at me in the face. His infidelity hovered over me like a thunderstorm. There were messages from a woman named Avril; her messages revealed how much she loved him. There were lots of pictures of hearts and kisses attached. As I saw a picture of the way she dressed, I thought back to the gypsy's words — 'a person who does not eat the same kind of food as you'.

*This can't be happening. Was she of Muslim religion? Was she the lady who was a threat to my marriage?*

I could not tell for certain. There were also messages from a woman by the name of Ronel. Her messages portrayed that he lived with her while he was working on-site. I must have had an astounded expression on my face as I continued reading his messages that revealed that she was desperately trying to hang onto him while he had lost interest in her.

As I continued to browse through his phone messages, I got the impression that Avril was his latest lover, and they were very serious about each other. After much deliberation, I concluded that he was the type who quickly lost interest and moved on to the next one. It all started making sense. This

explained all those disappearances, going to the car wash and coming back with an unclean car, and the excuses of all the late nights at work. It also explained why he could not take my phone calls. Instead, he chose to call me back when he was not in her company.

Despite having the evidence before me, I was uncomfortable. I wanted a confession. There was a sudden alarm vibrating within me. *How could I have been so blind when it was in front of me all along, staring at me?* I was uncertain how to address his unfaithfulness. I thought long and hard about how to resolve this painful situation.

I assumed there was only one way of doing it—that is, to tell him that it was over. Whichever way it turned out, I would try my best to be emotionless for the sake of my sanity. I'd held back for as long as I could. It was time to be true to myself.

'Who is Avril?' I asked, as soon as he stepped out of the bath.

'I have no idea,' he replied uneasily.

His response startled me. 'I have been through your phone, and I have read all the messages you exchanged with her and Ronel. How can you deny it when the facts are before us?'

He'd crossed the cheating line and was in denial. He looked like a trapped animal standing some distance away, with his head down, not daring to raise his eyes as I continued to question him. He remained silent throughout my questioning. I'm not sure whether he was shocked at being caught out or angry that I had gone through his phone.

He became aggressive and began to scream at me. He eventually flung his phone against the wall. He was furious that I'd skimmed through his phone and said very hurtful

things. I should have guessed that the confrontation would be met with denial and aggression, but I was not about to back down, as I'd seen the facts for myself.

'You have no right to go through my phone. I need my privacy!' He could not keep his temper under control.

'There shouldn't *be* any privacy between us!' I responded as I regained my composure.

We stared at each other awkwardly. Our marriage seemed to have boundaries—you stay on your side while I stay on mine.

Without saying a word, he marched up and down in the room while admitting to his affairs. He was cornered and confessed very sorrowfully. I managed to mine the facts from him, even though he was not completely honest and tried his best to bend the truth to make himself look better, ultimately getting himself out of the difficult situation of being caught.

'I have been seeing her for almost five years. It started as a casual fling. I did not think that it was going to last this long.' It sounded like a cheap, ridiculous joke.

'Wow ... five years. Clearly it never stopped. Was it worth it?' I paused as I waited for a response.

None came.

'Out of curiosity, why did you do it? Never mind, don't answer me on any of the questions I have asked. It does not matter anymore.' I smiled falsely and became even tenser thinking of these two women and wondering how many others there were.

'There is no future for us.' My words were a whisper but also a promise to myself, as I needed to consider what was important for me. It was time to stand up for myself in a firm way, as I was the keeper of my own happiness. I was not about

to surrender to his games. I was emotionally compromised, and that did not sit well with me.

‘On second thoughts and as a matter of interest, I *would* like you to answer my question. Where were you meeting her?’ I insisted.

‘In restaurants, hotels; I would take her out to dinner. But she means nothing to me. I am not in love with her. She is just an infatuation.’

I was bruised at the confession and the cover-up lies. He was deluded if he thought I bought any of his betrayal. When was the last time I was taken out to a restaurant, let alone to a hotel?

‘Don’t go there; it is so wrong. Infatuation does not last for five years!’ I snapped at him. At the same time, I had the urge to strangle him.

It was obvious that our marriage had disintegrated. I did not know how to fix it or even that I wanted to fix it. No one had ever made me feel so low in my life. He made me feel worthless. I should have checked it out immediately when I had my suspicions.

I was beyond hurt; I almost felt ashamed that I did not act on the warning signs before now. Even though I’d had my suspicions, I’d failed to accept them.

I moved into the spare room. His deception was unsettling. There was very little left to salvage. The affairs explained the miserable failing of our marriage.

There was no way that I could stay in a hurtful marriage that made me feel that I deserved no better. It all became complicated, with very little indication of what the solution would be. Looking at the magnitude of my problem, I was forced to reconsider everything about my life and confront the actuality, as he was not prepared to own up to his mistakes.

I would never recover the time that had passed; nor would I trust him again. Every recollection of the day would haunt me for a long time to come. I was wakeful and tossed and turned for what seemed like hours.

We hardly spoke to each other in the days that followed. When we did have a discussion, he kept pleading for forgiveness, making false promises to make it right and assuring me that it wouldn't happen again. I avoided him and concentrated on my business, which kept me occupied full-time.

Nobody was to blame for where I was sitting but myself. Although I kept blaming myself, I also knew that, at this point, it did not matter whose fault it was; the deed was done. Frightening thoughts of revenge started going through my mind. There was no future for us. It was time let it go and protect what was left of my reputation.

I woke up weary from lack of sleep, then watched the sun rise every morning. My mind was disturbed with images of them together. How could I pretend and continue living a lie? How could I allow him to touch me? The wall between us became impenetrable; it was too high to climb. My world was coming to an end. How could I forgive? Would I ever be able to forgive him and continue with my life as if this has never happened? A strong feeling of hostility overtook me, but I would ride the waves of the numbness I was feeling.

The weekend was over, and I was relieved that it was time for him to go back to work. It was a good thing that he was still working away from home. It gave me time to deal with our problems.

He'd stopped providing me with funds to support the family along with the running costs of the house ages ago.

Every month, his income took care of his needs. When I did ask for financial assistance, he refused outright and became defensive. I was taking care of all household and personal expenses to keep the family together – from college fees to the basic needs of my family – making sure that bills were paid and the kids were fed and seeing to all the essentials.

I needed to put a distance between us and make a clean break. It was time for me to get the wheels in motion. The ideal platform was set. On his next weekend home, I would inform him about my decision for a divorce. It was a scary decision, but I had to take the risk, irrespective of whatever repercussions might arise from my actions. I wanted more out of my life. This was not it. My age made things a bit more complex, but staying in an unhappy marriage could have terrible emotional effects on me and the children.

It was a Friday evening when he arrived home. I waited for him to settle down before approaching the subject. The tough moment arrived. Hoping for a civil dialogue between us, I plucked up the courage to inform him that I could not spend the rest of my life with someone who did not respect me. In a flash, Anthony packed his belongings, departing with the screeching of wheels. My three daughters were shattered. They could not accept what was transpiring, even though they knew about the anguish I was going through. I assumed that they may well be angry about my decision, but I prepared myself for their reactions.

‘No one should have to go through this. What will people say about us?’ they protested. They mumbled to each other but were indirectly addressing me. The blame all shifted onto me! He was exonerated from all blame for the failed marriage.

It made my heart ache to think I appeared to be the bad person. Colleen and Robyn also left the house in tears. I assumed that they were trying to digest the news that they received.

They returned later that evening and went straight to their bedrooms. My feelings would have to be put aside to give my marriage another chance and then deal with the breach of trust. I'd planned this through, but it was not going the way I thought it should. Further dishonour was on my plate, as I had to back out of my plans because my children objected to my intentions and made it apparent. I was not the one having the affairs. *He* was the one and was doing a great job at it. Now I understood how love could turn to hate and, why so many people remained in dead, loveless marriages while people on the outside were so quick to judge. My mind was foggy, doubting that perfect relationships existed.

He returned home later that evening after pleading calls from his children.

I made sure that I remained in my room, pretending to be asleep to avoid any confrontation. I was engulfed in a feeling of emptiness as I stared morosely in front of me. I was so outraged for having to stay in a loveless marriage.

I switched on the television, thinking that, if I watched the late-night news, my mind would be distracted. To my horror, the first hospital where I was treated appeared on the screen. My mouth fell open as I watched the news with disbelief. The hospital was being accused of harvesting body parts! I had a flashback to my nightmares. All my senses were alert. I had a tightening feeling in my stomach as I searched my body to check for signs of any missing organs – not that I would find them missing by searching or feeling my body.

The following morning, I made a dash for the phone to make an appointment with my doctor to confirm that all my body parts were intact. I was sure that they would have picked it up in the time I lay in the hospital. I insisted on a physical check-up to put my mind at ease.

To my relief, when the doctors checked, all my organs were intact; none were missing.

Once again, my mind went back to the conversations I'd thought I heard when I was in a coma. Maybe there *was* some truth to several of the incidents and they weren't just hallucinations!

Something about the hospital was unclear, but I could not put my finger on it. Certain events in my nightmares I'd had while in a coma were unfolding now; it petrified me. The nightmares were starting to blend with real things that were happening to me.

Later that day, I did my own research into the hospital. I discovered information that was scandalous. There were terrible reports from displeased patients who'd lost family members due to negligence. There was also an article about a young girl who discovered that her kidney was missing. It was frightening. The hospital was under the scanner for doing shameful deeds. *Had I almost been a victim of organ harvesting?*



# 15

I lay in bed filled with sadness, staring into space in the night, remembering everything that took place, replaying the conversations in my mind, thinking about every discussion, reflecting on the hurtful dialogue. I paused to consider what I was leaving behind to start from scratch all on my own. The agony of saying goodbye to my old life and accepting my reality felt overwhelming. All these thoughts forced me to assess my priorities once more. I was worried about my future and thinking of how distraught I was by Anthony's disloyalty. I began to question my sanity and speculated about why he'd had these affairs, why he'd treated me so unkindly.

*Was I to blame? Did I drive him to seek other women? Will I make it on my own?* I needed to process all these hurtful experiences that had led to my current situation. I reminded myself that I made a sensible move. Forgiveness was not going to take place overnight. However, the idea of the divorce began to take a serious toll on my well-being. I became exceedingly uncomfortable as I worked through my feelings, while figuring out what I truly wanted.

I had to deal with this in a logical way. The distasteful occurrences were upsetting, but my intelligence told me that my decision was long overdue. It took me a long time to see through him and react to his deceptions. It was expected that

my whole world would be altered, as I was sacrificing my stable life and giving up my place of safety to step into a new world. The sense of watching my world fall apart before my eyes was crushing. However, I would not lose hope. I would take whatever bold action was required from me to better my position. It was time to stop feeling sorry for myself. My main aim was to separate myself from my past and trust that things would unfold as they should.

My day began like every other day. I woke up to a fresh cup of coffee made by Anthony, as he did for me every morning. I took a sip; it tasted rather strange. My tongue was numb. I felt dizzy and spent the day in bed. *Perhaps I ate something that upset me. Surely the coffee was not responsible for making me ill? No, he wouldn't!*

By the time evening came, I was feeling better. I thought I must be coming down with a bug or with some kind of virus.

Two days later, he made me coffee once more. I made toast to go with it, but once again, I felt dizzy. This time, my stomach became upset. I was in agonising pain. I spent the rest of the day throwing up in the bathroom.

I was rushed to the hospital casualty, as my nausea and stomach pain persisted. After many blood tests, including examinations, the doctors could not find anything wrong with me. I was put onto a drip, but my symptoms seemed to worsen. By now I was panicking.

I was admitted into hospital for further observation. Anthony left me at the hospital. I learned later that he informed my family that I was stable and that it was not necessary for them to come pop in to see me. Megan and Colleen were confused by this information because of the condition they'd seen me in earlier.

They insisted on coming through to the hospital to make sure that I was in good health.

History seemed to be repeating itself. They were horrified to find me in a critical state, with the doctors rushing around my bed. I was delirious and had an excruciating headache. I was drenched with perspiration as the doctors ran further tests and drew more blood from my veins, but they were unable to trace the cause of my illness. All the tests that they ran came back normal.

One of the doctors enquired from me whether I could raise enough funds to do intense testing, as the benefits from my medical fund did not cover the particular tests they wanted to run.

I responded that I did not have the amount of money they requested. I watched as the doctor flicked through my file with a surprised look on her face and insinuated that there was a good chance that someone might have given me something to eat or drink. She suggested that someone in my company was very naughty. *What exactly was she implying?*

My blood went cold. She really didn't have to say more. I read between the lines and made my own assumptions. It did not need a lot of imagination to know the inevitable. How was it possible that the doctors could not diagnose my condition and, furthermore, were strangely unable to identify my illness or even make a close diagnosis?

Instead, I was treated for flu and for an ear and throat infection. One of the doctors implied that the dizziness I was experiencing was caused by loose crystals in my inner ear.

Yet, the doctor's comment raised many questions in my mind. I was convinced that someone might have given me something to eat or drink against my will. I had no proof that

anything of the sort had happened, but the mystery had me thinking deeply.

I was fortunate because I managed to survive the ordeal. Whatever the individual's intentions were, the plan seemed to have collapsed because I was still breathing! I had once more cheated death.

When my kids came to the hospital that Sunday, they all looked very uncomfortable. I asked what was bothering them, but they remained edgy.

Stephanie eventually blurted out, 'Mom, Robyn heard Dad speaking to someone on the phone. He made arrangements to meet whoever it was during the course of the day.'

'Who was he talking to?' I asked curiously.

'At first Robyn thought he was talking to you, but as the conversation went on, she concluded that it was someone else. Before ending the call, he told the person how much he loves her and that you were in hospital.'

In a strange way, the information did not upset me as it would have previously. I told them not to worry about it. When I got home after being discharged from the hospital, I was extra careful with what I ate or drank. I could not live a life of constantly having to look over my shoulder to see what unscrupulous act was going to strike me. I was afraid that, out of desperation, Anthony might allow his infidelity to influence his actions and do something fatal to me.

At the same time, I convinced myself that he would never harm me. Even if I thought that, I also somehow knew that it was worth paying attention, not because I was afraid, but because my life seemed under threat. Looking away or being ignorant at this stage could be crucial.

Back home, I retired to my room. I was standing by my bedroom window and listened to the wind howling when I noticed a shadow lurking under my door in the darkness. There was a deep silence as the shadow stayed briefly before it moved away. Cold chills moved down my spine, as all kinds of thoughts went through my mind. The moment felt like forever. I was afraid and wanted to hide but was simultaneously unable to move, being rooted to the spot. I wondered who lurked by my bedroom door. Was it one of the children or maybe even an intruder?

The following day, I learned that it was Anthony, who was getting water to drink from the kitchen. Why did he linger by my door for a while? Maybe he wanted to discuss the day's events and then suddenly changed his mind.

Morning came. I was once again presented with a cup of coffee made by Anthony. I informed him that I did not drink coffee anymore.

He took the cup and shoved it at me. 'You will drink it. I've been making you coffee for the past thirty years,' he insisted firmly.

I was obliged to take the cup of coffee from him. Later, when he was gone, I poured it down the basin in the bathroom.

I became uncomfortable in his presence; there was no predicting what he had up his sleeve. Nor did I have proof that he or anyone had attempted to do the unexplained. Like a dark cloud in the distance warning that a storm was imminent, so was my gut feeling warning me to be cautious! This may sound crazy, but I was terrified to eat or drink anything given to me by anyone. I became paranoid and started imagining things. I remained silent about it all though

because I assumed my suspicions were unfounded, and therefore, my concerns were invalid.

I had been married to this person for more than thirty years, and he turned out to be a stranger to me. He transformed overnight. I did not know him anymore. Deception can be brutal. I found myself grieving for my past and mourning for the future I'd thought we were creating together. I was nervous to confront him because of his history of violence. I never knew when his disruptive behaviour would rear its head. Even though the violence diminished over the years, my thoughts consciously drew me back to the past, so I decided to remain silent.

The days turned into weeks. Megan and I met at a coffee bar to spend some time together.

'How are you coping with the situation at home Hannah? You seem distracted. Did you sleep well?'

'Look at me; I'm a wreck,' I replied, giving her an account of the past weeks' misfortunes. I briefed her on everything that the doctor had implied when I was in hospital with that mysterious illness.

She was speechless. Her advice was for me to speed up the divorce, settle for the best price on the house, and cut all ties immediately.

'I have no proof that my drinks or my food have been interfered with, but how do you explain what happened to me? I am hardly a sickly person.' My suspicions were unsupported at this point, as I did not have the evidence to back me up. I presumed that my mistrustful thoughts caused me to imagine everything.

'Do you remember the day we overheard him speaking to his friend Benjamin?' I stirred up her memory.

‘Yes, I do. I wanted to refresh your memory too but chose not to. I thought you’d erased it from your mind, so I did not want to upset you further.’

‘How could I forget when all three of us heard the discussion clearly? His friend asked him if he was prepared to wait until my money from the fund is released or whether he would go ahead with divorcing me.’

‘Yes, his response was that he was willing to wait for the money. It appears as if your assumptions are true. The facts are presenting themselves. Walk around with your eyes and your ears opened, as I know you can be very trusting at times,’ warned Megan.

‘Always remember that premeditated murders come from people who are very close to us—those people have very shifty intentions in their minds and plan their actions carefully before they act. However, no one is free from the consequences of his or her choices, and it will catch up with the person concerned. The individual involved seems to want power and control over all you have worked for. When I think of all you’ve been through, it makes my blood boil that someone may be trying to hurt you. Don’t ever let your guard down.’ Megan looked very serious as she offered her point of view.

We stayed at the coffee bar a long time expressing our thoughts about the inexplicable mysteries that were unfolding in my life. Who would do such a thing and what was their motive? These things happen on television, not to me. We came back to the fact that I could not explain or prove any of the occurrences. Anything was a possibility. I had to be alert. I was let down and dreaded the idea of going back home. I always gave the world the impression that all was good, walking around responding to people with false smiles on my

face, as if my life was problem free. No one knew what was going on behind closed doors or the emotional abuse I endured. Who knew what my fate would be next time if someone *was* actually intent on doing me harm or destroying my life? Someone seems to think that my life was not worth living. I went home feeling very unbalanced and knew that I had to respond more carefully to situations that were making me feel unsafe.

Over the next few weeks, I was in and out of the offices of my lawyers who were attending to the divorce. My nephew Renaldo, gave me the support I needed and urged me to think carefully before making my final decision, but my mind was made up. I could not believe that I had made this painful decision to end our marriage. It took a lot of courage to dive into this unpleasant split-up, as I had been putting it off for many years. I eventually plucked up the courage to go ahead with it. I was a few days shy of being free from the unpleasant relationship that had upset my life for so many years. He did not contest the divorce. He willingly signed all the documentation when it was presented to him.

During the divorce proceedings I could sense his intense anger towards me. I appeared in court a week later after he signed the papers, and the divorce was settled. I was relieved that it was over with and that I could start my new life as an officially single woman. I set him free and, at the same time, liberated myself.

My fate was decided. I accepted it gracefully, even though it came with a price – a very high price of thirty-odd years of my time, hard work, and effort that I'd put into the marriage. It was futile to regret my decision, as the bad marriage had already consumed too many years of my life. I did not want



to waste any more time on regret. Everything changed in an instant for me. I had not signed up for all his cheating, lies, and unhappiness. It was good to be free from this fake relationship. I was not perfect; I had my flaws and had made wrong decisions and some mistakes during my life, but only time would tell how my life would still evolve. What mattered to me was that I had taken the positive step to a happier life, and I had the resilience to pick myself up. I would deal with the aftermath of these changes as they came.

When he received the news that we were legally divorced, Anthony's temper once again got the better of him, and he began to scream. He lashed out at the children. Every tasteless word in the dictionary was flung at me. He tried to shift the blame onto my daughters, accusing them of knowing about my intentions to file for a divorce. He also insinuated that I'd discussed it with them and that they could have given him the heads-up. He made himself the innocent victim by looking for someone to blame for his shortcomings. It was easier to blame someone than to face his own reality. He was afraid to admit his wrongdoing and wanted the children to carry a part of the blame for knowing about the divorce. Maybe this was a cry for support from the children, but if it was, he was going about it the wrong way.

'Why did you not tell me that your mother was going to divorce me? I could have stopped the divorce if I knew about it in time,' he kept yelling at them.

I expressed that the divorce had been underway for a long time; no one was to blame but himself. I'd discussed the divorce with him anyway, but he evidently thought I was calling his bluff.

'Relationships never die on their own you know. It took *you* to destroy it. Our marriage broke because of lies, cheating, and lack of respect.' I informed him.

He continued saying terribly hurtful things, but I just ignored him. I did not want to give him the benefit of the doubt of knowing how his words affected me.

'We had a beautiful life when we started out, but you were the one who chose to go astray. Admit your faults and accept that you were wrong. Maybe then you will be able to see the bigger picture instead of trying to push the blame onto everyone else.'

He remained silent as I spoke.

'I am sorry that we got divorced and for everything bad that happened in our lives, but it was always about you, not about us. You are the one who decided to seek the company of someone else by giving up on our marriage. Man up. Don't go around blaming everyone for what has taken place. You milled whatever was good between us.' I tried my best to exercise control as I spoke.

He seemed to be holding me responsible for the damage of our marriage and forgot that there were consequences for his choices. Maybe this was a natural reaction for him, but I needed to make sense of why he was acting so surprised and blaming everyone around him.

He spent the next hour on the phone broadcasting the news to his friends and family, updating them on the divorce and telling them that he was officially single. I could not understand his anger because he was the one who'd expressed dissatisfaction with the marriage by choosing to be disloyal.

'Thirty years down the tube. You destroyed this marriage, always trying to make yourself better!' he kept shouting for the whole neighbourhood to hear.

I heard the sound of dishes and cutlery being flung around in the kitchen. When Colleen and Robyn heard the commotion, they left in the hope that we might settle our differences. I was afraid to be left alone with him; unfortunately, I had no choice but to face the music. At the same time, I was relieved that they would not be exposed to his cruel verbal attacks. I kept my distance from him, but I was also glad to have the helper in the background should anything happen to me.

She remained in the background and, occasionally, I heard her announce, 'God help us!'

He called me horrible names. When he was finished degrading me, he got into his car and left in a great haste. The car's tyres screeched as he drove off, and I let out a sigh of relief. I remained prepared and ready for his next move, as I could not bear to be caught unawares.

My nerves were on edge when he arrived a few hours later with all his friends, already half intoxicated. I'd somewhat expected the drama that followed. I sensed trouble by the way he spoke; his body language told me even more. This was the start of my nightmare. His family also showed up at my house. The fun and games were about to begin. I did not have to be part of it.

I could just imagine the false gossips that he must have told them about me, as most of them just looked at me with not even as much as an acknowledgment. They continued walking to the entertainment area, each holding a different type of beverage in his or her hands. The music began to blast

so loudly that the windows in the kitchen rattled. Sympathy drinking was going to take place. The sooner I left, the better.

My helper packed a weekend bag and left for the weekend, not wanting to be part of the racket. *Buckle up. It's going to be a jagged ride*, I carefully considered as I grabbed my bag, bolting for the door as the children arrived to pick me up.

I left the house before any drama could take place. My son-in-law, William, joined Anthony in the hope of consoling him.

Later in the evening, William phoned sounding nervous as he warned me about the unpleasant situation that was going down.

'It is not advisable to come home now. Anthony is intoxicated and angry. His friends are planting ideas into his head and giving him drunken advice. He may become violent, and he is not in control of his actions,' William cautioned with an unsteady voice.

We ordered takeaways for dinner and then found a quiet place on the Hill Top View. We stayed there for most of the evening. The sight from the top was stunning, and the lights were glowing brightly, but I was unable to appreciate the scenic beauty in front of me. I stood at the lookout point viewing my surroundings from the top and, at the same time, observing my own state of mind. The stillness of the night allowed my mind to dwell on what was taking place and Anthony's anger, together with the many questions that were going through my mind. There was a chill in the night air.

William phoned again and suggested that we fetch the key to his house and that we should stay at his place till he called again. By the time midnight struck, William phoned again to tell us that Anthony was asleep and that the coast was clear, as all his guests had left. We were relieved as we made our way home, quietly entering the house.

He awoke at midday, appearing calm, as if he'd digested and accepted the divorce. Could it be the calm before the storm? That remained to be seen.

The next few weeks became very uncomfortable, as we had to face each other, sometimes spending time in the same room.

Soon after, everything started falling into place. The agent found a buyer. I was pleased that the house was sold. The price was not what we were expecting, but we took the offer anyway, as we were both in a hurry to go our separate ways.

I heard a knock on the door late on Saturday afternoon. To my surprise, there stood Megan. It was a pleasant surprise, as I'd seldom had company these last few days. We went into the kitchen, where I made a pot of tea. We made ourselves comfortable and discussed our individual ventures.

'There seem to have been many terrible ordeals taking place over the past few years in your life, Hannah,' Megan pointed out after some time.

'I have no idea why my life has changed so drastically. I have made it my duty to embrace each experience and learn from every hardship. Life has been difficult—the affairs, the accident, Colleen's ordeal, losing the business, being unemployed, having to sell my home, and the divorce, just to mention a few. It really is a great deal to process at once. It's been one catastrophe after the other,' I replied sadly.

*Too many things had gone wrong in many different ways,* I thought with discouragement. Maybe God was angry with me.

I was unable to find the meaning to my suffering or even see the hidden lessons. I was not spared. My plate was overflowing. The thought suddenly brought tears to my eyes.

These days, the tears flowed easily. I could not control them. Everyone's story has a bit of sorrow, but mine had plenty.

'What can I do to improve my life so that it can become easier?' I asked Megan, turning to look at her, hoping to find answers.

'I'm sorry for what you're experiencing right now. There seems to be some horrid unknown force hovering in your life. Remember God's plan never fails. Do not get disheartened. When you go to church, pray for the removal of all evil that is operating in your life and for what is beyond your ability to control. Don't worry about anything. Just ask God for what you need and always be thankful when you pray, not forgetting to ask for forgiveness. Never cease praying.' Megan continued to be supportive, giving me the courage to move forward, and at the same time, her presence was a healing one for me. She somehow had the heart for making things better.

'I rebuke any evil from my life and I send it straight to' – as I looked around for the closest thing to me to point at, just then the dog walked past – 'to this old brown dog!' I said, pointing and making a playful joke.

We both laughed at the joke.

An hour later, Megan went home. Robyn assisted me as I fed the dogs.

Just as we were ready to settle in for the night, the dog came up to us for a goodnight pat on the head, as he always did. We both screamed at the same time, making a dash to get on the other side of the gate as we noticed that the pupils of the dog's eyes had changed to a strange dark yellow. We continued to stare at the dog through the gate as he began to snarl at us. His actions were far from normal. The dog did not

respond as we called to him; he continued to howl and stared directly at us. The other dog picked up the howling too. Both dogs howled continuously throughout the night. It was a very eerie sound that gave me the shivers. I went about my duties of locking the doors as usual and preparing to go to bed. I lay awake in bed listening to the noise.

‘What is happening to the dogs? They are freaking me out!’ Robyn appeared in my room looking startled.

I reassured her that the dogs were just agitated and that she should return to bed.

When I awoke the following morning, I was taken aback when I found the brown dog lying dead near the kitchen door and the black dog sitting close to his companion. Guilt filled my heart as I remembered my silly joke.

How could I have made such a distasteful joke? My thoughts flashed back to the hospital when the two dogs were marching up and down in my ward. What was the connection between my dream and this incident with the dogs? The visions were becoming more realistic than ever before. I was determined to find the answers.

Had my dreams been warning me about something? Or was it just a bad coincidence? Was there really an evil spirit lurking in my life? Had it been transferred to the dog? My mind was way overstretched.

I phoned Megan to tell her what had happened. Was I to blame because of what I’d said? She insisted that it had nothing to do with our conversation, even though I knew deep down that, as the saying goes, ‘The tongue is a powerful weapon.’

My memory went back to my nightmares in hospital, which all seemed to be coming to light—the selling of body

parts, the fraud in my business that related to the missing money in the train, the bed and the tree episode, and now the dogs! I became tense, thinking back to my horrible nightmares.

A few days later, we were very sad when the other dog died with symptoms that were unknown. Wicked thoughts about the entire situation filled my mind, as I was caught up in a dark twist of bad fortune. Maybe I would be cut some slack and my problems will ease.

It took a whole week to complete our packing and divide our possessions in half. I made sure that Anthony received everything he needed to start up his new home. We kept the process as amicable as possible to avoid upsetting the children. To keep the process from becoming a contentious battle, our assets were split down the middle. Everything that he was legally entitled to was given to him. I did not want to drag this mess out by holding back on whatever he requested. I wanted this chaos to be over and done with.

The children helped him look for suitable accommodation but one of his friends offered him a cottage that was on his premises. I was relieved that he would not be living alone. We also found a house to rent, and then we went our separate ways.

I know that God never promised that life would be easy, but He did promise that He would always be at my side, no matter how difficult and trying my situation turned out to be. *Will I ever adjust? Will I get used to this?* I wondered as the tears of distress started all over again, and it all began to sink in.

Unfortunately, life is not fair. Tragedies strike our lives at some point or the other. The right decisions were not written in a book for me to know what would take place after all this.



Right now, I was on a journey with no destination. But somehow, I considered that I was on my way to where I was supposed to be. I was doing okay. It would get better; it normally does. Bad things happen to everyone; I was no different. My choice was either to sit around and mope or shake off the loss of my marriage. There were a lot of 'what ifs' on my mind that kept unsettling me.

All I could do was pray as I made plans for my future. It was difficult not to feel anxious at the thought of starting from the beginning on my own. It was not an option for me to accept defeat and hide. I had to get back up and be the fighter I once was and fight to overcome these many ordeals facing me. I finally closed the chapter that disturbed my life.

I would never get the years back from my past, but I was free from the chains of pretending that all was sunny and bright. Like the saying goes, 'Running water does not flow back.' It's the same with life; it's happened. I was driven by hope. It was time to create my own fate.

Over the years, I'd lived with guilt, avoiding the truth of my failed marriage. But in the end, I was fooling myself because *I* ended up becoming the miserable one. I doubt that our marriage could have lasted another month, let alone another year. The divorce was painful on both of us, mentally and physically. I'd been taught valuable lessons, good and bad. Some of the negative experiences were overpowering the good and refused to go away, but in the end, they'd also helped me to acquire more wisdom.

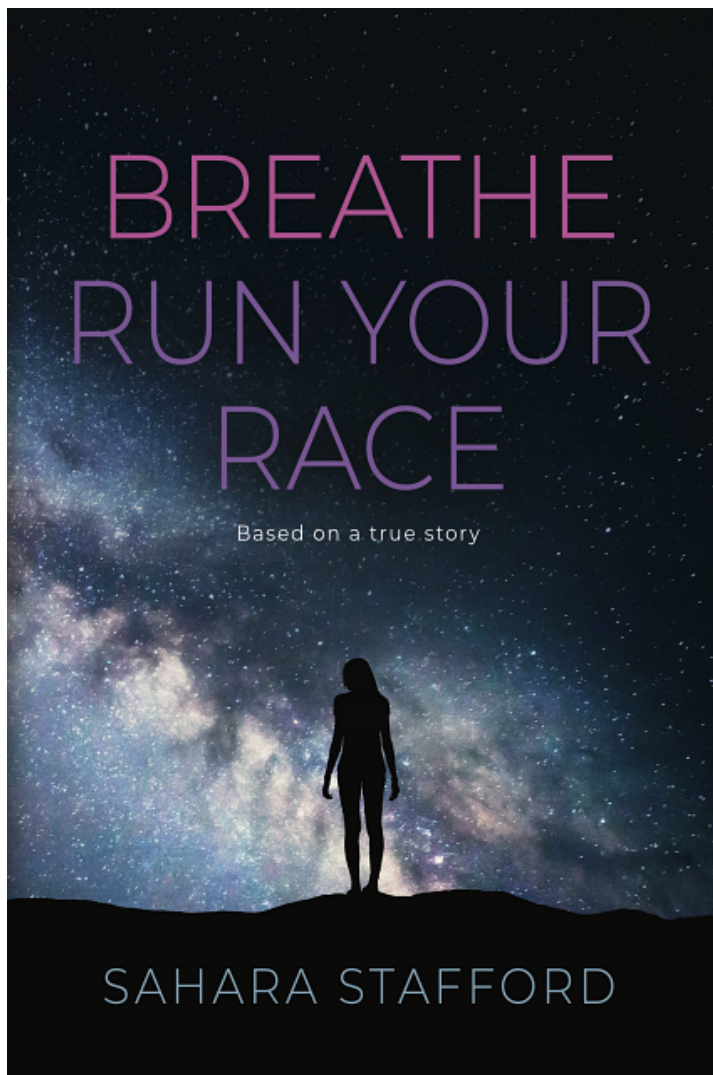
I grew up overnight from all that had happened. I suddenly got that heightened feeling that there was no place I could call my home. I was wandering on an unknown road, with just my faith my pocket.

# About the Author

Mother of three. Had various occupations but spent most of my career in the insurance industry focusing in Human Resources.

My preferred being an entrepreneur in the Agri food industry. I am Registered as a qualified assessor within the training sector.

When I am not working, I read a wide variety of books and watch some sport like tennis and soccer. Love adventure and any kind of challenge. I recently started exploring art. A slogan that resonates in me is 'I see trials as probabilities and struggles as an opportunity to develop your strength.' I am a Survivor when disaster strikes.



*There has been one catastrophe after the other. Hannah was unable to find the meaning to her suffering. Her dreams are shattered by her husband's betrayal. Her weapon of faith fought back against the turmoil around her.*

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