

VULTURE

by Alessandra Azzaroni

PROLOGUE

I often wondered to myself if I was a complete failure or not. I thought I was doing well in life, but I wasn't really succeeding. And if you're not succeeding, you must be doing something wrong... right?

Indeed, I felt as though I'd never live up to everyone else's expectations. But that surely wasn't uncommon; surely there were billions of us failures around the world, knowing we'd never amount to anything, and that we'd learned to live with that knowledge. It was our way of life.

Maybe I wasn't a failure as much as I was a destroyer. I destroyed people's lives... *literally*. Indirectly, some people had told me, but two lives were lost, and the one left despised me for my "murderousness", as they put it.

"I hope you're happy," they told me, as if I had planned for them to die, but I didn't!

Still, I believed for a very long time that I was a killer, maybe because I had no one else to blame.

And killing my family members had taken away my soul... if I had even had one to begin with.

CHAPTER ONE

I dared to think of myself as “normal”, but what was “normal”? I was not talented nor untalented, attractive nor unattractive... I was stuck in the middle with seemingly nowhere to go. I'd forever live in the infamous Gap of life. The Gap was not an American store in this case, but rather a category where the non-categorised people were. The Gap was not officially known, but it was something I had named, something I'd created.

And I created many a thing in my time. I was uncertain what to do with my future, so I did a bit of everything. I took classes outside the standard school ones, and I filled my free time with everything from cello, to singing, to swimming, to tennis, to cricket, to cooking, to giving blood, to volunteering at the local hospital, to reading, to writing, to painting, to listening to music, to watching television... I thought I was such a good person, running around doing everything. I had to try *everything* if I was to discover what I would do for a career.

I had my courses all chosen for my first year doing the Victorian Certificate of Education, Year 11. I had chosen English, Further Maths, Psychology, French, Music Craft and Twentieth-Century History. I had many dreams in life but I tried to shut them out, for they were not quite realistically achievable, and an office job wouldn't suit me, so I believed I'd end up as a dole bludger, filling in the form each week to say that I had “tried” to apply for three jobs, to get a pay packet from the government. This was the life I imagined, when I wanted to hurt myself by thinking of the future. All the other millions of fellow Australians on the dole would all be in the Gap, the same Gap that I was in. Each country had their own Gap, and we were all united because we all had a Gap. It was a Global Gap.

My mother had asked me numerous times, “Have you decided what you want to do for a living yet?”

Non-committing, I'd reply, “I'm leaving my options open.”

I had not yet grown up. When we're young, we change our dream job regularly. I had wanted to be the standard firewoman, policewoman, doctor and many others.

*Show me what I am, for you know I can't see
Please show me shades of what I'm supposed to be
Please give me guidance to light my path of life
And please do it fast, before I take the knife*

I often wrote a lot of things; novels that would never be completed, short stories that were short and usually without meaning, useless poetry, prose that was really just complaining. I wouldn't have called myself a writer, for I was far too mediocre to be categorised as such (another downfall to being in the Gap).

But whenever something occurred to me, I wrote it down. I knew that it was all probably terrible, without quality, and I was the first person always to admit that. I was my own harsh critic. But at times I was the only one to think and speak highly of myself, and what I did. If you don't blow your own trumpet, no one else will.

I knew how I appeared to my friends – arrogant, but always in a playful way; joking around; extremely moody... and clearly different from everyone else. I never had had a *best* friend, and at numerous stages in my life I had *no* friends. I'd never had a boyfriend, and I was sweet sixteen-and-a-bit, and never been kissed. Such was life for us in the Gap.

As a non-conformist who understood myself, I never wore makeup or nail polish, and I didn't go out trend shopping. I never had drugs, drank alcohol, smoked, had underage sex or dyed/streaked my hair.

My hair was naturally a strange colour, which was really a mix of colours, depending on lighting, cleanliness and whatever else. My straight hair was parted in the middle and stopped halfway on the way to my elbows. Its colours consisted of black, chestnut brown, auburn, burgundy (though how I got that, I'd never know), gold, silver and copper. My friends compared it to that of the latest international rock chick... but rock chicks do *not* play the cello.

My hair is like me

We are everything, but not one

As an only child, my parents had high expectations, placing all of their wishes upon me, for I was the only person around to carry the anvil of such a burden. They were both in their early twenties when I was born. I didn't even know if they had completed university, if they had even *gone* to uni.

My mother worked for a telephone company, and my father worked in an electronics superstore. Not exactly extremely money enhancing, but maybe they belonged in the Gap, too. But they couldn't be in the Gap, for Gap-fillers, as I referred to us, would not place expectations upon other Gap-fillers.

My mother shoots me down with her laser-beam glare

And I fall while she throws up into the toilet

There are a number of things you think of when you hear people throw up. Food poisoning, overeating, bulimia, excessive alcohol consumption, ill health, disease and pregnancy.

My mother was pregnant. And one afternoon, instead of hassling me, she actually seemed pleased to see me. She threw her late-thirty-something-year-old arms around me, and pulled me close to her as she squealed, "Leesie, I'm pregnant!"

Had she not hugged, smiled or squealed, I still would've known she was happy. She always called me Leesie when she was happy. I didn't want a cutesy little name. I had been christened as Lisa, and that was how it should've always been.

I hugged her back awkwardly, unused and uncomfortable with physical contact with anyone. "Good for you, Mum."

She pulled away from me, sat me down at the kitchen table and proceeded to tell the details. "I just came back from the doctor. Three weeks, Leesie, and we're both happy and healthy. Well, maybe not happy," she added with a girlish giggle. "But we hormonal mums-to-be are entitled to a little bitchiness."

I had the decency not to remind her that she already was a mother – to me.

"I've called your father," she continued. "He's bringing home champagne."

"You shouldn't drink while pregnant," I pointed out.

"Then you two can drink it." Turning her cheerfulness down a notch, she said somewhat seriously, "I know that people your age drink, but you don't. I want you to fit in properly with your peers, Lisa, I want you to be like them."

This was incredible. "You want me to drink and smoke and turn this place into a shag shack when you and Dad are away for a night?"

She laughed. "You're so uptight, Leesie. It'll do you good to have a little drink, help you lighten up."

I was not hearing this; I was *not* hearing this...

"Whatever you say, mate," I mumbled, barely moving my lips, my eyes anywhere but the bubble-headed mother of mine.

"Look at me, Lisa," she said, and I turned to face her.

She scrutinised me, and I felt self-conscious. Did my eyebrows need a pluck? Did I have blemishes? Had I not blown my nose properly? Were my eyelashes clumped? Did I need more lip balm?

“You’ve got such gorgeous eyes, just like your father’s,” she commented. “And your hair...”

Her hair was very different from mine. While mine hadn’t decided what colour it wanted to be, hers was blonde and thin, but bouncy and layered. Her very bloneness made her seem like a happier person, and maybe she hassled me for a good reason, to convince me that I *really* needed to make a decision about my future. Maybe she did have good intentions after all.

“New Year’s is coming up,” she said. “Are you going anywhere?”

“I’ve been invited to Jenny’s,” I answered.

“And will there be boys there?”

“Mum, they’re just mates!”

“Oh, come on, Leesie, you need a New Year’s kiss! I reckon you’d be quite a stunner if you prettied yourself up a bit more.”

“Yeah, yeah,” I mumbled.

“I’m gonna help you before you go out on New Year’s,” she told me. “And you can’t say no, because I’m a bitchy pregnant woman.” She fake-growled.

“Well, if it’ll make you happy...”

*My mother wants me to be pretty like her, but I'm not
We don't even look alike*

CHAPTER TWO

New Year's Eve meant it was summer in Australia, but of course, sometimes the infamous Melbourne weather made it seem as though it wasn't. Victoria was officially known as the Garden State, but Melbourne was unofficially known as the Rainy City.

New Year's Eve fell on a Tuesday. Since midway through the week before, it had been hot. Our house didn't have air-conditioning, and I didn't have a fan – whether it was a box fan, a ceiling fan or otherwise – in my bedroom, so sleep was a trouble. The overnight low was 20°C the night before New Year's Eve, and on New Year's Eve itself, the temperature didn't even make it to 30°C. It was such a relief to have this weather again. I was a winter person, most definitely.

The day before, we had had some rain, and December 31 was the same. We needed the rain. Because of the El Niño effect, the country was officially declared in a drought. The more rain, the better... but that's not what I thought later.

My mother kept her promise, but I didn't really care. I didn't know why she was fussing so much, but pregnant women were stereotyped as being cruel, or they hysterically cried, if they didn't get their own way. There were lots of things said about pregnant women, and I had no idea if even any of them were true.

For instance: morning sickness. In a book I once read, the girl actually had evening sickness, and she first thought she'd eaten something that her body just couldn't handle. She'd gone for an abortion after that, but she ran away after she was called into the room. She was a swimmer who had a good chance of being in the Commonwealth Games, but she had to give that all up. But she still enjoyed her baby boy.

*My mother says I'm beautiful only when I care to be
Which is never*

Not only would I be an unemployed dole bludger, but I'd also be single.

I didn't want my mother to go too far with prettying me up. I didn't think she could do much to make me beautiful. Gap-fillers weren't beautiful. We were ordinary, nothing special.

She'd found a hairdresser's that was actually open on New Year's Eve. This was surprising, but she explained to me that many people wanted to be prettied up for parties, so business was booming in hairdressers' all around the country (the countries north and west of us were behind us in time difference – they had to wait).

My mother had booked me in for a two-thirty appointment at Sofia's. The name immediately occurred to me as strange, for I knew of two restaurants named Sofia's. Guess it was not just for food.

Italian-Australians ran the whole place. My mother hadn't brought a book or magazine to read, for she said she just wanted to watch me. Was she expecting a transformation? Was she expecting something drastic to happen?

While Francesca washed my hair, my mother asked me what I wanted done. I answered simply, "No colour at all, no completely different style. Just a trim."

"Just a trim?" she repeated, eyebrows raised. "Oh, come on, mate, other girls colour their hair."

"Well I'm not 'other girls' now, am I?"

Francesca turned off the water, removed some excess water and towel-dried my hair. My mother had a dissatisfied look on her face, but it wasn't because of Francesca. It was because of me. But good instinct knew that I'd get my own way regarding my hair in the end.

Francesca led me over to a vacated black leather swivel chair, in front of a mirror and a built-in bench where the equipment lay. She said to wait for Mario, so I lazily had a look at the combs, scissors, clips, a shaver, a hairdryer and a spray bottle in front of me.

“Want your belly pierced?” my mother asked.

Of course, my answer was no. I didn’t want to show off my belly, so why on earth would I want it pierced?

Mario came up behind me, I could see in the mirror. He had a shaved head and wore a denim vest... and were they leather pants?

“So, what do you want done?” he asked.

“Just an inch off.”

He took my hair and brought his fingers up to not far below my shoulders. “There?”

“Yeah.”

He got to work clipping sections of my hair out of the way, and took a fine comb and the thin, long scissors. It didn’t seem like too much time had gone by when the cutting was done. I was offered for my hair to be blow-dried, and I took up on that offer.

I didn’t look that different when it was all done. Just an inch of my hair was gone. Of course, *any* haircut made me feel that my head was lighter, but that was probably just a psychological thing.

*Sometimes I wish I were a conformist
Because then people might smile because of me*

My mother had already bought things for me to wear. She even got the sizes right. I didn’t know when she had gone out shopping, though.

The first item was a sleeveless, black-sequined top. Then there were black leather ankle boots with chunky heels. “You could wear these with the jeans we got you for Christmas,” she told me. My jeans weren’t fancy, just plain dark blue denim. Altogether, I didn’t think the outfit was bad at all. In fact, I was touched to see that she bought things that actually suited me.

I dressed, and then she got to work on my face. I wouldn’t let her paint my nails, though. I said that if she really was so desperate, she could give them a clear coat. This was a nice gesture by my standards.

She liked my complexion, and said that I had good lips, so she concentrated only on my eyes. I think she knew that only a little makeup would go well with me.

As she applied the eye shadow, eyeliner and mascara, she said to me, “I think the baby’s gonna be a boy.” I was about to say that that would be nice, but she broke in. “Don’t speak, don’t move until I’m done.” She smiled. “It’ll be nice to have another bloke in the house.”

“Mm,” I sounded.

*My mother thinks she has magic hands
And can transform me like the ugly duckling
But transformations don’t happen to Gap-fillers*

CHAPTER THREE

After the events that happened, it's no wonder I can't really remember the New Year's party I went to. I can't remember who I talked to, what I did, what I said. I just remember that as my mother dropped me off at Jenny Window's house, she said that she'd come to pick me up when I called. I felt bad about making her stay up so late, especially because she was pregnant, and therefore I thought strict precautions had to be taken to make sure her and the baby were both completely healthy. I even said that my father could pick me up, or I could get a lift home with someone else, but she seemed adamant to be the one to take me home. I still don't know why.

I wasn't one to stay up late, mainly because I was bored, and a little lonely. So at about half past midnight, I found a quiet space in the garden outside the little fence-gate around the pool. I used my mobile phone to call home. My mother answered, and said that she and my father would both come to pick me up. My mother really wanted to come by herself, but my father wouldn't let her.

I waited on a chair in the front yard, watching a game of street cricket. I don't know how long I waited there. After one o'clock came by and no one had come for me, I even bowled a few overs in the cricket game, and had an over batting before I was caught out.

I watched as others were collected in cars, and still I wasn't. Then I got the Dreaded Call.

*Call me from the grave and reassure me you're alive
For otherwise I'll fear that you're never coming back*

"Hello?" I answered, once I saw that it was a private number.

"Is this Lisa Camberwell?" a masculine voice with an Indian accent asked.

"That's correct."

"This is Dr Maharaj of Rexton Hospital in the obstetrics ward. Your mother, Joan Camberwell, is here."

"Oh," I said, surprised. "Well, I'm sure my father can pick me up and take me to the hospital."

"He can't, I'm afraid. We can arrange for a member of the local police force to collect you, but we'll need the address."

I rattled off Jenny's address, and the doctor assured me that a car would come by in about ten minutes.

I was worried about my mother. We weren't close or anything, but she was my mother. And being in the hospital was bad, because she was far too early in her pregnancy. I only prayed that she would get through the trouble all right. I didn't know the baby, and so I had no attachment to it. Sure, I'd prefer it if it would live, but I wouldn't be too upset if it died, just as long as my mother made it through alive.

The police cars nowadays were standard dark blue sedans. The light that could flash and ring out was what separated them from other cars. Obviously, I didn't need to be at the hospital so badly that the police had the flashing light and siren going.

The street cricket game had finished a while ago, so the car came down Edward Avenue without a hitch. I saw the white headlights appear, and the car stopped in front of the house. Some of the people left at the party looked at me strangely as I hurried towards the car, but they didn't seem bothered enough to ask me about it, and the empty beer, wine and spirits bottles around them signalled that they probably couldn't think of the words to say.

The car stopped, left its lights on, and a man emerged from the driver's seat. I couldn't properly see what he looked like in the dark of the very early morning, but I saw the navy blue uniform with the Victoria Police badge shining in the streetlight.

I went over to the man. "I'm Lisa Camberwell, and I was told I'd be picked up by the police to go to Rexton Hospital."

"I'm Constable Milicci with the Rexton Police," he introduced, though he didn't waste time shaking hands. He came over and unlocked the passenger door. "You can sit up front."

We didn't talk much on the way to the hospital. I had a feeling that he wouldn't speak unless I did. I desperately wanted to ask him if everything was okay, if my mother and my not-yet-born sibling were both alive and my father's whereabouts known. However, I knew that the hospital would have that information. They probably had only sent a cop car over to pick me up because no one else could.

Actually, it was surprising that a cop car was actually available to pick me up. Surely there'd be stacks of New Year's brawls and riots all over the world as each place struck midnight, got into the alcohol and went wild. (And I later found out that this was true, especially on the Gold Coast up in Queensland.)

"Quiet night?" I asked as we went down the highway.

"In this suburb, yes," Constable Milicci replied, but he added no other information.

Maybe fatigue and low light affected me, because I forgot my surroundings until I saw the Rexton Hospital come into view. I had only been there for the occasional volunteer work I did a few times a year. I'd never been there at this time of morning, though. But it was still the same white brick building with brown bits, five storeys in some places and only three in others.

There were plenty of spots free in the car park that was closest to the obstetrics ward, one of the three-storey places. In fact, I thought that the other cars in the lot probably only belonged to the staff. It made me wonder where my parents' Holden Commodore was... not that I was paying all that much attention to the cars in the lot. My thinking usually went on strange plights when I needed sleep.

The inside of the hospital was glaring white brightly in contrast to the midnight-blue darkness (minus the streetlights) of outside. I thought that my eyes must've resembled those of someone with a hangover, desperate to block out the brightness with sunglasses. But now was not the time for something like that.

Some of the hospital's staff nodded in greeting to Constable Milicci, and I followed him down the corridor to the lift like a lost soul looking for guidance.

As we got off the lift on the top level, the third, a nurse called out from the reception desk the number of a room in which we were to go to, but I didn't really take it in. I just followed the constable.

The man who I guessed was Dr Maharaj met us outside the room. "Lisa Camberwell?" he checked. When I nodded, he gestured to some nearby white plastic chairs. "I think we should talk before you go in." So I sat down in one of the chairs, and waited patiently to hear what this was all about.

"On the drive to the house," he began, "there were a lot of reckless drivers on the road. And in one street, there was a race going down the hill."

"P-platers," I murmured. I had a friend who lived on Horden Road, the place on the hill, and they always talked about the P-platers screeching down at all hours in their little red cars.

"Your parents were unaware of this," the doctor continued, "and your father, who was driving, braked suddenly. This, unexpectedly, caused a pile-up, as a few cars just happened to be behind. But instead of just crashing into the back, the car was actually pushed into the intersection – and before the racers could stop, they both crashed side-on to the car. They had been taking up both lanes."

I immediately feared that both my parents were dead, my father certainly. I knew where Horden Road was in relation to where Jenny lived, so I knew the side the car would be hit on the

driver's. He *had* to be dead. But what about my mother? If she had died, surely she wouldn't be in the obstetrics ward.

And shouldn't I be crying right about now?

No. I didn't cope well when bad things happened, so I didn't have emotions. I had nothingness, emptiness, a void, but that was it. So I didn't cry.

"Matthew Camberwell died instantly," Dr Maharaj continued. "A local saw what happened and called for an ambulance. Joan Camberwell was taken here, and she was haemorrhaging." He sighed. "She miscarried, and as you can imagine, she's not taking it well. We've given her a light sedative, so she's sleeping now."

I was almost afraid to speak, but I couldn't stay silent forever. "Can I see her?"

"You can watch her sleep. We'll leave you alone." The doctor stood up. "Would you like a blanket, pillow, drink?"

I stood up. "No thank you." I saw that Constable Milicci must've been long gone.

Dr Maharaj opened the door, and I saw my mother sleeping. She was breathing, I could see, but she had a tortured look on her face. I feared she was dreaming, having a nightmare about what had happened. I wanted to wake her up, to take her away from the hellhole that was the silver screen of her own mind.

But I couldn't. She would see me, her alive child... and be reminded that her other child was dead.

*Two out of three isn't bad, for one did not die
How come she was the one death managed to defy?*

CHAPTER FOUR

I sat in the grey chair beside her bed. I was tired. I wanted to stay awake, to be there for her if she awoke, but instead I ended up falling asleep, sitting upright.

*You sleep with your sedative, and I sleep with my fatigue
You dream that it's all a dream, and I dream that I won't wake up*

“Killer!”

The almost breathless whispered exclamation woke me from the blessed comfort of nothingness. Had I dreamed that word, or had it been for real? Or did my own conscience suddenly speak out to me?

“You killed my husband. You killed my son.”

I cleared my eyes open, and I turned my head slowly to the left. My mother was awake, sitting up. Her hair was flattened and frizzy from her sleep, but her eyes did not seem hazy as they stared at me.

“You... you're a killer, but you're still alive. *Why did you kill them?*” she suddenly screamed, eyes wide with fury and fire. It had to have been me she was talking to. But I hadn't killed anyone; at least, not that I remembered.

“Lisa... Lisa Camberwell, *you* – You killed my family!” Her eyes became teary as she began her monologue.

“They say that guns don't kill people, people kill people. They say that children can't possibly kill, but then why is every outcast teenager in America shooting their peers? And you... you're not any different. You decided in your sick, twisted little mind that you wanted to take away the two people in my life who mean the most to me. And you wanted to kill me, too! Why did I survive? Why did you *let* me survive? Did you just want me to feel the pain?

“You planned it, didn't you? You went off to your party knowing very well you could get a lift home with someone else, but instead you called us, knowing that all the rest of us would come. You set up for that race to be on, you set up the cars behind us and you *set up for us to die!*”

“You're a vulture, Lisa, a *vulture*. And do you know the exact meaning of the word? A vulture is a large bird that feeds on carrion. And do you know what carrion is? *Rotting, dead flesh!* And you like it that they're both dead, because you're a *vulture!*”

“I know why you killed baby Robert, Lisa, don't think that I don't. You wanted him to die because if he lived, *you'd* be the lonely one, because all three of *us* would be united. And you wanted Matthew to die because you wanted to bring me pain! You'd kill your own father just to bring pain to me.

“And bringing pain to me is easy for you, isn't it, because we're not related. Don't look so shocked, Lisa, as if you couldn't guess! We don't even look alike! I'm a blonde, and *you're* the spitting image of your American whore of a mother!

“Matthew had always kept his family separate from me, as if I wasn't good enough for them. He kept his whole *life* secret from me, but I found out about it. I know that he met her in a pub near the manufacturer's he was visiting, and I know that she ran the hotel there in Sovereign Hill. And I *know that she took my husband from me!*”

“He didn't tell me about any of this, oh *no*. He didn't tell me that he impregnated her, and that she wasn't going to abort it, or give it up for adoption. He wanted a child, but he *didn't want mine!* So he said he'd keep the baby, you, and make up a story.

“And he did! He said that his sister had died and that you were her baby, to explain the family resemblance. And I wanted to believe him *so* badly that I *did* believe him, although I knew all about Alison.

“But I knew the moment my husband and son died that you definitely were her daughter. Alison hated me because Matthew wouldn’t leave me for her.

“But you know what, Lisa? I know something that will hurt you more than anything else in the world. *She didn’t want you!* That’s why she was so willing to just *hand* you over to my husband. *No one* wants to be a single mother, and that whore was no different. She practically raped him to keep him to her forever. She did things to him that I refused to do, and he did things to her that he wouldn’t do to me.

“She was a vulture just like you, Lisa, and probably still is. In fact, I’ve been doing some investigating lately, and she still runs The Sovereign. Also, there are some positions available in Sovereign Hill for the holidays, and maybe even beyond.

“This place is *perfect* for you, I know you’ve always loved going there. And guess what? It’ll be like you *dream job* to work there! And it’ll be a perfect opportunity for you to meet your mother, because you’ll get housing in The Sovereign. Don’t be surprised, Lisa, that I’m actually encouraging this. I’ve been planning ever since I learned I was pregnant with Robert that I would send you there, and you’d meet Alison and you’d *know* the truth. You’ll know it as soon as you see her.

“You can live with me for the meantime, until you go down to your interview. Since you’re good at cooking, I think one of the bakeries would be perfect for you. You can dress up in the special olden day outfits and bake those old-fashioned goods. You’ll be a shoe-in! And then you’ll move there, and I’ll be *free!*

“I know you’re a vulture and a killer, Lisa, but I’m giving you this chance because I somewhat care for you. Even though you’re not mine. Aren’t I nice? And I hope you’re happy with your murderousness.

“Now, if you’ll excuse me, Lisa, I need more sleep, but I’m glad we had this talk.”

Without another word, she lay down properly and conked out immediately.

I had been wordless the whole time, without emotion as I listened to her rant. But it was more than just a rant – it was the truth. I couldn’t confirm that, but I believed everything she said.

Everything she said about not being my mother, anyway. A killer, me? Maybe I was. Maybe my father and my not-yet-born half-brother were my carrion. And I was the vulture.

I stalk around, searching endlessly to find what I’m looking for

And I spot it

I don’t have to kill, because it’s already dead and waiting for me

It fuels my fire and feeds my hunger

I am a vulture

CHAPTER FIVE

Within days, Joan Camberwell was out of the hospital. And she stuck to her word – she really *did* get everything sorted out for me to have an interview.

So one Saturday we got in her car and drove the two-hour drive to Ballarat, where Sovereign Hill was. It was a place of history. The Eureka Stockade had taken place here, there was even a pool named after it in Ballarat. Here was where the goldfields used to be, and there was some in Bendigo, too. I couldn't remember my Colonial Australia history very well, but something turned into violence, and the Eureka Stockade began. This was currently presented in a sound and light show called "Blood on the Southern Cross".

Sovereign Hill was a touristy place, where it was a little town set up like it was in the time back then. It was all a dirt road, with shops lining both sides, like the Apothecary, New York Bakery, a small bowling alley as how it was back then... Then, of course, one could tour an old goldmine that was set up with fake people still in work scenes, while a tape ran through with the sounds of the scenery and the workers, and some commentary on the working life.

I'd been here once with my family, once for Year 6 camp and once for a Year 9 day trip for my Colonial Australia history class. I'd always just been looking on. But what would it be like to actually participate?

*A colonial goldmine town holds the key to my future
But my future may have no lock
No door
Just a brick wall trapping me where I am now*

The New York Bakery interview was with a woman named Helga Berringer. She was exactly the way all cooks should be – short and plump with a ready smile and a love for food.

First she asked me of my history with food, and then wanted to see if I could follow a recipe. She put a recipe for Chelsea buns in front of me, and I made them, icing and all.

Then it was over. I found my mother – not my real one, just Joan Camberwell – in the sweets shop, buying eucalyptus and honey drops, barley sugars and raspberry drops. Then we went to the car pack and drove back home.

Waiting is knowing that something might never come

I wasn't really expecting to get the job, so I was rather surprised to hear Helga Berringer tell me down the phone line that I could come down to start whenever I was ready. I'd have a room at The Sovereign.

At that last bit of news, I almost jumped out of my chair in anticipation. My biological mother was the manager of that hotel, and I would get to meet her. But would I tell her about whom I was to her? Would she believe me? Or would it be best to stay silent?

*The cobwebs of my mind have cleared out
Vacuumed away into oblivion
With open eyes I can see things ahead of me
Too bad they don't stretch very far*

With my bags all packed, Joan Camberwell drove me to Sovereign Hill once more. Once there, I couldn't pay attention to my surroundings. I was quivering like a shaggy dog in the rain.

I went into the lobby of the hotel on my own – Joan had already driven off; she was free from me now. So I walked in and tried to hold my chin up.

Almost immediately after I entered the room, a tall woman with fascinating hair walked up to me. Her hair consisted of black, chestnut brown, auburn, gold, silver, copper and, surprisingly, burgundy. Describing her hair, I could have been describing my own! Hers, however, was twisted up into a bun, and she wore a navy jacket and skirt set, while my hair was held back with a thin gold plastic headband, and I wore my favourite navy jeans with a black cotton top.

I noticed her glancing at my hair, but she didn't say anything, nor did her facial expression change. She just looked serenely calm, with a peaceful look on her face.

"Are you here to work in the New York Bakery?" she asked. She just *had* to be my mother! How many women with American accents could there be in Ballarat?

"That's right, I'm Lisa Camberwell," I replied. I spoke slowly, hoping she'd react to my surname.

If she recognised it, she didn't show it. She merely nodded, and held out her hand. "Hi, I'm Alison Bridges," she introduced herself. "I'm the manager here at The Sovereign. You should've been told that all non-local workers at Sovereign Hill board here?"

"That's right, Helga Berringer of the New York Bakery told me." I shook her hand.

She pulled her hand away, and nodded again. "It's my responsibility to keep an eye on you new girls. I'm supposed to be like a mother figure while you can't be near your own."

I desperately wanted to blurt out that she *was* my mother, but I didn't. There'd be plenty of time for that. "That's fine with me. May I ask which one is my room?"

"Follow me."

I picked up my bags and followed her down a few corridors. She stopped at Room 17, and plucked a key ring with a sole key out of a jacket pocket. She handed it to me. "Here you go. There's a communal bathroom at the end of the hall. You'll find my business card in the room if you need to contact me. You'll be getting a roommate soon." She turned away without a good-bye, and I was left alone.

EPILOGUE

I didn't care about working in the New York Bakery. But that was what kept me in Sovereign Hill, so I had to give it my all. Especially since I really didn't have anywhere else to go. Joan certainly didn't want me back, and I didn't have anymore Camberwell relatives.

I was here to try to get Alison Bridges to be my mother. Sure, she'd been very non-committal at our first meeting, not even showing any signs that she recognised me, my name or anything else. It would take time.

But I had to pursue. I had a purpose. I had determination. I couldn't fail this time. I had to forget I was a vulture. That would be difficult, but it was something I had to try to do. Besides, if I had to get Alison to be my mother, I'd have to tell her what became of my father, Matthew Camberwell.

Now I just had to get a plan.

THE END