**BSH 12**

**SISTERS**

“I’ve found it, Jen! Our family photo album. It was hidden in that old blanket box of Mums. Wow! This brings back some memories.

Ah, look at this, me in my pram and you leaning over me. You’d have been about four years old then. Weren’t you cute with your curly blonde hair and dimpled cheeks. I bet it was a shock to the system when dad returned from war and uprooted you and mum from your cosy suburban existence and you moved to the country. And before you knew where you were I came along. Being the happy go lucky child you were, though, you must have taken it all in your stride.

Here we are now in matching yellow gingham dresses. I recall this was my first day at school and you took your responsibilities as big sister and protector very seriously.

Those school days flew by. Before long mum was taking these photos of you in your spanking new High School uniform, complete with Panama hat. Hockey, tennis, swimming; you did well at them all and even won some awards. Remember this picture of them lined up on our bedroom shelf?

And now it’s my turn to be pictured on my first day at the High. ‘You’re Jen’s sister, aren’t you?’ the older girls would say to me and from then on, well into adulthood, I got used to being known as ‘Jen’s sister.’ Not that I minded. I rather liked reflecting in your sporting glory, and anyway I was more interested in academic pursuits.

Hey! Dad must have taking his one of us opening our Christmas presents. How excited we were to get a TV quiz book each year. It’s great how that love of quizzing stayed with us. Many an evening has been spent in a smoky pub; you lighting up and me coughing and sputtering whilst we show our general knowledge – occasionally even winning.

Look at you all dolled up for a night out dancing, wearing your favourite full skirted shirt dress. I remember you dipping those lace petticoats in starch to stiffen them. You thought you were so grown up with your white stilettos and cork tipped cigarette. I’d have loved to go with you, but the last thing you wanted was little sister spoiling your love life.

Who can forget your first car. Here it is, a pre-war Morris convertible in all its hand painted yellow glory. Now it was your turn to spoil my love life when you gave me a lift to my friends house. I knew that her dishy brother and his mates would be there and was horrified at what they’d think of me turning up in this beat up old jalopy. How little I knew about the mail sex! For all they were concerned I could have been invisible. All they had eyes for was your little yellow peril.

All too soon we were grown up and here’s you in your wedding photos, Brian standing proudly beside you. Is that really a cigarette you are holding alongside your bouquet? How attitudes have changed since then.

Marriage and full time work put your sporting days. The nearest you got to sport was each Sunday when you faithfully supported Brian as he played for the village cricket team. You even did the scoring for them! Though how you understood all those weird runs and ducks I don’t know. I used to come along with you sometimes and took these photos of you preparing the cricket teas. A woman knew her place in those days!

Remember me taking these next pictures on my first visit to your new home. Housework was never your forte, was it? I remember having to battle my way into the house through the cloud of cigarette smoke that you both appeared to be immune to. Your garden, though, was a different matter. I couldn’t resist photographing these lovely colourful herbaceous borders. Very 1960’! Of course your working life revolved around flowers and plants. Your customers at the garden centre always picked you out especially for your knowledge of gardening and your friendly helpful manner. In fact, you could say your garden was your baby.

OK, you didn’t have any babies of your own, but you were a proud auntie to my two. Can you remember the baggy green cardigan you knitted for Jason when he was a toddler? I swear it would still fit him today – and he’s 45 years old and nearly six feet tall.

All these wonderful memories contained in one album. In all of them you are happy and smiling, spreading a ray of sunshine to everyone you met.

Nearly five decades later there are no more pictures. No photos of you struggling breathlessly on the short walk to the shops. No pictures of you in a wheelchair when even walking became too exhausting. And no picture of you in your hospital bed; a tube attached to your wasted body draining nicotine coloured gunge from your damaged lungs.

Little did I expect, when we were those carefree children, that I would be looking through this album, selecting pictures to create a photo montage of your life to be shown in the crematorium. That the next flowers you would be given were in the shape of a cross on top of your coffin.

Mum and Dad used to hate to hear us swear, but I think I would be forgiven just this once.”

“Sodding Cigarettes”.