

This Is An Edited Extract From *Butterfly On A Pin* by Alannah Hill published by Hardie Grant Books RRP \$32.99

Dear Mum

Melbourne 2018

Dear Mum,

I found a photographed memory of you and Nan today, Mum. It was in the sad drawer. Look at you both. You're sitting on the swing in your bright-red pantsuit and Nan's leaning on the frame. You must have been around forty-eight years old. I wish that I hadn't found it, because all it did was split my heart in two with a yearning I've not experienced for a long time, Mum. A yearning for my mother and my grandmother.

I miss you, Mum. And I miss Nan.

Mum, do you know that you and Nan gave me my values, my morals, my old-fashioned girly ways? You gave me more than I ever gave you credit for, and I am deeply sorry I didn't tell you that.

This story began with one of your attempted suicides, and now I'm closing with a love letter to you. On all the pages in between, my memories have shown me how our story will never end, that it cannot end, because although your heart may have stopped beating, Mum, your heartbeat is forever linked to my own.

When you died, Mum, I felt like I had been struck by lightning. Your death dislodged something inside me, memories cutting through feelings I buried a long time ago.

I have written words that are perhaps ungrateful, words that perhaps I should not have written, things I ought not to have felt. I had more love to give you, Mum, but you did the one thing I never thought possible. You died. You died the week when I'd promised myself I would try harder, and now your voice is silent, deadly silent.

But you left me with a golden key, the most spectacular gift you could leave a girl like me. You told me that you always knew what happened to me on that train, on the Tasman Limited when I was twelve years old. You allowed me to unlock the trauma of my childhood and bring it into the light to heal. You finally made it real not just for me, but for both of us.

Do you remember our last conversation in your smoke-filled lounge room, Mum? I remember every word we breathed, Mum, and I'll never let this memory go, because on that morning you gave me what I'd been searching for all my life. You gave me the truth.

You told me you'd always believed my childhood was smothered in darkness, a darkness you tried to ignore, a darkness you had to ignore because God was watching us. Did you hear both our Sacred Hearts break when you finally told me your truth? That you believed me all along? How you couldn't bear to live, knowing my childhood had been twisted and pulled out of shape?

I understand now why you let me go, Mum, why you cut me loose – it was the only way to banish your thoughts of what happened when I was twelve years old. I know you would have altered the path of my childhood if you knew how, but your broken

heart could bear only so much pain. I try to remember moments when I saw you happy, or gazing into the mysteries of the universe.

I was afraid of you, Mum. Your temper and sadness and nervous breakdowns were confusing. I was angry with you too, Mum. I knew I could never tell you why. I didn't understand why you didn't stand up for me. Why you didn't believe in me. Why you didn't believe me.

I remember the fantastic love you had for your own mother, and how your father, who fought in the war, arrived home a completely changed man – a broken father and husband no longer able to smile or laugh. Your mother and father were the only two people in the universe I never heard you speak ill of, Mum. Not another living soul escaped your black wit, your wrath, your apocalyptic putdowns of everyone and everything.

I would often find you lying on your unmade bed, your head toward the wall. I knew you wanted to die, Mum. I wished I had been enough to make you happy, but nothing made you happy.

I remember you staring into space when I asked you what I was like as a little girl. 'Oh, I don't know what you were like, dear. But we did have VERY SPECIAL TIMES in Chasm Creek, Lannah.'

Were these some of the happiest days of our lives, Mum?

It was just you and me, Mum.

I loved your memories of our special times in Chasm Creek, Mum, because I have so few of my own, and they're all tinged and scorched with pain and regret. I do remember any special time together suddenly stopped when my father came home, how I'd instantly freeze if I heard Dad's car. I'd run blindly into the nothingness of Chasm Creek, hiding in my special secret spot in the mop cupboard. I do remember both of us wondering how hiding in the cupboard would make a scrap of difference – he couldn't see me in real life, so why the hell did I need to hide? You gave me my dark, absurd, slightly berserk sense of humour, Mum, and without it this world might have long ago killed my spirit. You and I could laugh in the face of darkness, we could laugh about the neighbours, the milk delivery boy, your three grandchildren, my four 'hopeless, supercilious, mind-numbing boyfriends'.

I ignored phone calls from you, Mum – I was afraid I wouldn't be able to make you laugh and afraid you would cry. I'd been so angry for so long I didn't know how to tell you. I couldn't understand why you didn't stand up for me. I was hurt that you didn't want to know E. Becoming a mother showed me I could love just like other mothers love.

And I do love him, Mum, E is everything to me.

We'd wonder together how you spent years leaning on the mantel-piece with your head in your hands, about your name being Aileen, and your mother's Eileen:

A lean

I lean

Both of you were leaners on that mantelpiece!

And now I lean on mantelpieces too.

I often couldn't breathe when you told me that you wanted to die, that you had nothing to live for, that you missed your mum and dad and just wanted to be with them. I knew I wasn't enough to make you want to live. Nothing made you

want to live, Mum. Do you remember me crying into my Prada handbag, crying at how utterly devastated I'd be if you were the type of mother who could ever really die?

Mum, two years ago a lady grabbed my arm in Chapel Street with a knowing smile and a wink. It was Roz, your favourite hairdresser from Penguin. She knew how to tease hair professionally and she listened to you, she was the friend you needed. I greeted her with my sadness all shut up inside my heart.

'Oh Alannah, your mum just loved you, she was so proud of your success, it was all she talked about, she glowed when she talked about you.