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courage and joy.'* KAYE ADAMS

# Retirement Rebel

*One woman, one motorhome,  
one great big adventure*



*Siobhan Daniels*



Retirement  
Rebel



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# To

My daughter Samantha Hibbard-Daniels  
for believing in my crazy dream.

Paddy and Lorraine Daniels for their never-ending support.

Maggie and Ann for their unwavering friendship.

Lucy at Flow yoga studio, Tunbridge Wells, for starting me  
on my journey of self-belief and empowerment.

My little cuz Clare for always supporting my dreams.



## *Introduction*

I ran into the toilet cubicle at work and locked the door behind me, sobbing uncontrollably, my body shaking. I felt totally distraught and angry. I looked at myself in the mirror and could see my raw emotions looking back at me, which made me sob even more. I had just been confronted about something, I don't even remember what now. For well over twenty years I had been working as a news presenter, reporter and producer in radio and television, and doing a very good job. I knew my job inside out and yet here I was, reduced to a blubbing mess hiding away in the ladies' toilets. For a long time now, in my fifties, I felt my work and my ability to do it had been undermined and questioned. It felt to me like everything I did was put under a microscope. I felt my age was against me in the workplace and stories were being given to far more junior and inexperienced staff.

My stress levels were so high I was unable to sleep. I would toss and turn in bed imagining conversations I would have with people I worked with, if I only had the courage. All that courage just dissipated as I got ready for work. I dreaded going into the office but would put on my makeup – my 'game face' – and head into work each day, even though in reality I felt totally broken.

In the latter years most days I would walk home from work sobbing after being berated in front of my colleagues, often for

things that were out of my control. I was made to feel as if I was not a valued member of the team. Every day I felt upset about situations in the office and how I felt I was being treated. I would fight back tears because I didn't want to show how I truly felt, but deep in the pit of my stomach I felt sick. I would feel overwhelmed with panic and unable to recall information any more. My menopausal brain didn't help. I called it my 'cotton wool head'. I even forgot names of people I had worked with for years. I would look at them and in my head I was thinking, 'What's their name? I know I know their name. Why can't I remember it?' It was an awful feeling. It made me feel anxious at the best of times.

I felt there was no understanding at work of women who were going through the menopause. You couldn't have that difficult conversation to explain what was going on; how you were struggling, feeling exhausted due to lack of sleep because of hot flushes and your head full of all the stressful conversations at work, or worrying that you didn't have the same mental sharpness at the moment. You knew that your performance might not be up to par, so you would have loved to do a particular type of work until it settled. When I did try to tell them what impact the menopause was having on me and my work, it fell on deaf ears and my work performance was actually questioned, which only added to the stress.

It triggered something in me from my childhood and brought back all my childhood horrors. I am one of eight children, and my Irish father, Jimmy, who had multiple sclerosis, was very strict. He had been brought up by strict parents who would give him what he called 'a good hiding', and that was the way he was with us. For most of my childhood I remember him walking

with a walking stick. I was very afraid of him because he would use that stick to beat us and we would be locked in the damp, dark cellar overnight as punishment. I am still very scared of dark, confined spaces to this day. He would shout at us and make us queue up outside the sitting room to wait our turn for a 'good hiding'. I would hear my siblings cry out as they were given their punishment and watch them emerge from the room looking traumatised and crying, and then it was my turn. I remember that fear I felt inside as a child. I would never be able to respond properly when he asked me a question because of that fear, and I knew my lack of response would warrant another 'good hiding'.

Now, even though I was in my fifties, some people I worked with could still make me feel like that lost, frightened little girl. That feeling of foreboding was palpable. When I felt I was mistreated at work, my brain would just clam up with fear.

I also missed the support of family at the time, but when I wanted to visit them in the north of England that too was often fraught with problems. I was made to feel my requests for certain rota shifts to allow me to travel were too difficult to accommodate. This compounded my sense of sadness and worthlessness in a job I had previously thrived in for over two decades.

As I was crying in the toilet cubicle I knew at that moment I could not carry on this way. No, not could not, *would* not. I had had enough. I was not prepared to put up with behaviour that made me feel so stressed and at times suicidal. I had to hatch an escape plan. I didn't know then what size or shape my plan would be, but I did know that I needed to do something drastic to cope with the things happening around me.

Feeling exhausted and increasingly marginalised and invisible at work, I had dragged myself into the office for the late shift. I was nervous about how I would actually get through the day as I struggled to cope with the raw drama I faced daily in my working life. I was losing who I was.

I had said to my daughter that morning that I was going into that black hole, where I had to just pretend to get through life ... that sometimes I didn't feel like pretending any more. And that scared me.

I eventually pulled myself together in the bathroom. I washed my face and reapplied my lipstick. Ignoring my bloodshot eyes, I told myself out loud, 'You can do this, you'll be okay', and I unlocked the door ... took a few deep breaths ... and went back into work. People were obviously aware that I had been upset, but we all tried to carry on as normal to get the job done.

I noticed on my phone that there were a couple of missed calls from my sister Helen, which was strange as she didn't often call me at work. I got a feeling of foreboding and wondered if there was something wrong with our mother, who was in her eighties and lived in Leeds. I made a mental note to call her during my break a little later on. For now I needed to concentrate on doing my job.

Most of the staff went home after the programme. There were just a few of us left to output the late news bulletin. I went to the top of the office to take my break and called my sister. She answered the phone very quickly. I said I was sorry I'd missed her calls earlier and asked if there was anything wrong. There was a long pause at the other end of the phone; then she explained to me that she had been diagnosed with lung cancer. I felt like I'd been punched in the stomach. I couldn't take in

what she was telling me. Only four years earlier our brother Jonathan had died of lung cancer aged fifty-three. Now, at the same age, Helen was facing the same life-threatening illness. I could hardly breathe, but listened as she told me what the doctors had said. She was optimistic she could fight it and I tried to sound optimistic too. Inside my head I was screaming, 'Nooooooooo, this cannot be true.' Helen was such a great big sister. She was the matriarch of the family, a pillar of strength for all of us in various ways as our mother aged. I just could not envisage life without her.

When I eventually got off the phone I crumbled. I was done. This was too much. It was just too awful to get my head around. I was consumed with anger. My sister could be dying and that was all that mattered to me now.

This was a crossroads in my life.

Only hours ago I was thinking about my dissatisfaction with my work situation, but all that just paled into insignificance now. I was being shown that life is precious and can be taken away so easily.

I could allow myself to be overwhelmed by all this, or I could use it to spur me on to dig deep, face my fears and find an alternative way of living; a positive way of ageing ... My escape plan had begun. I was going to fathom out a way to break free and live my life the way I wanted to, for as long as I had left, even if it took me a while to execute that plan. What was I going to do? How was I going to make it happen? I had a few years before I could retire and not much money. Despite that, I knew then that my life just had to change. But how?



# Chapter 1

## *Bereavement*

I woke up the next day and it hit me hard that my sister Helen had cancer. I was blindsided by her diagnosis. She started her chemotherapy treatment straight away and I was optimistic she would beat it. A couple of months later I caught the train up to Leeds to see her for lunch. It was then that I realised just how poorly she was. She had greeted me at the station in a taxi and we went to the Jamie Oliver restaurant. When she got out of the taxi I was pleased to see just how pretty and well she looked. She was wearing a beautiful long floaty, flowery dress. We waited for our table and chatted. When the waiter approached and said they had a table for us upstairs Helen looked scared and told them she wouldn't be able to climb the stairs. I knew then that she was far more poorly than I had realised. We had a long chat and I asked if she was afraid of dying; she said she wasn't. She was just heartbroken at having to leave her husband and children and she was trying to put things in order. That was the last time I saw my sister conscious. She died in the November, less than six months after being diagnosed.

I was heartbroken, devastated. I just could not deal with my grief. All my energy went into getting myself into work and

surviving the shift. I would then retreat to my bed for days on end, with no real sense of purpose. When people asked me if I wanted to go out I made excuses because I was depressed. I knew I wasn't performing as well as I could at work. I was hanging on to everything by a thread. I put on a lot of weight and just cried for hours lying on the sofa.

My amazing daughter, Samantha, who since she was very young has been a voice of reason, struggled seeing me just slobbering on the sofa and crying all the time. I became a single mother when she was four, and she had seen me just getting on with life, facing difficulties as they came along and forging a career in radio and TV. Now I was retreating from life and not coping at all well. She encouraged me to go to the doctor, where I managed, through floods of tears, to explain how I was truly feeling at times: as if I didn't want to go on but at the same time I knew I had to for my daughter's sake. Finally I admitted that I needed help. The doctor was very understanding and made me realise I was going through a lot. She put me on anti-depressants. I also sought some counselling, which did help for a while.

I still had this feeling inside me that I needed to do something to regain my life. Retirement was not an option yet, but I knew I needed to change something and to at least get fit. I had to do something to push me out of my comfort zone and to believe in myself, especially when other people were talking down to me and making me feel worthless.

That was when my daughter had a brainwave. Arriving home one day and seeing me in my usual prone position on the sofa feeling sorry for myself, she said, 'Let's run a marathon', to which I swiftly replied, 'Let's not!'

She said I had always told her that ‘out of adversity comes opportunity’ and this was a perfect opportunity for us to do something: to raise money for Cancer Research UK in memory of my brother Jonathan and sister Helen.

I protested that I wasn’t fit, couldn’t run, wasn’t in a good place. ‘A marathon, for God’s sake?’

Not to be put off, she swiftly entered us both for the Brighton Marathon, enthusing about just how much money we could raise for the cancer charity.

Two days later I was begrudgingly putting on an old pair of trainers and heading out for a run/walk with Sammy, puffing and panting and complaining a lot. She wouldn’t stand for any of my nonsense. I said I couldn’t run in my trainers, so she took me along to a running shop where I was filmed on a treadmill to make sure I purchased the right shoes for me. I was blown away by how expensive they were. I was reassured that it was money well spent because the trainers would support my feet correctly as I ran, and this would prevent injuries. I then complained that the car fumes were too much for me and I couldn’t breathe, so it was impossible for me to run. So she mapped out our training routes along private roads and in parks. That stopped me using the car fumes excuse. My next complaint was that I needed music to run with. So Sammy very kindly took time to make me a playlist for my iPhone. Of course, that wasn’t good enough for me: I complained that it was ‘the wrong kind of music, I can’t possibly run to it’.

It was only after one particular day, when we were out running and I was moaning like a petulant child and she ran off and left me, that I realised I was being awful to her and needed to change my frame of mind. Thankfully she returned ten minutes

later ... stopped ... put her hands on her hips ... looked at me angrily and asked, 'Are you doing this or what?' I sheepishly apologised and started running slowly alongside her.

From that moment on I told as many people as I could that I was going to run a marathon. I wasn't surprised many of them wondered how I would actually be able to do that, bearing in mind my weight and state of mind. Plus I was in my early fifties, not really a time when people embark on their first ever marathon. The important thing was, the more people I told, the less likely I was to chicken out. I wouldn't want to lose face by not doing it.

Slowly we got fitter and fitter. Surprisingly I actually enjoyed the training and the long runs. I began to feel good about myself and what we were going to achieve. Some of the people I told even began believing I might actually be able to do this because they could see my determination. Every day I told myself, 'You can run a marathon,' hoping I would eventually believe that I could. I felt more empowered every day I trained, spurred on by the fact that people were being so generous with their sponsorship.

I now took the training very seriously. We were following a book called *The Non-Runner's Marathon Trainer*. It is aimed at people like me who are unfit and have never contemplated running a marathon before. It promises to get you to the point where you can actually finish a marathon. I was yet to be convinced when I started the sixteen-week training schedule. I remember one section, very early on, that said if you feel pain, say to yourself, 'Run with me, pain.' Well, all I could think at the time was, 'That's a load of rubbish, I just want the pain in my side to stop, I'm not running with it.' The more I worked through the

programme, the more it made sense, and I loved the training by the end and felt ready for the 26.2 miles.

The day came for the Brighton Marathon and I was so nervous. Our friend Bob, who had run a few marathons, got up at the crack of dawn and came down from London to support us on the start line, which meant a lot to us both. He knew that feeling of trepidation at the start, and wanted us to know that all the training would kick in and that the feeling as we crossed the finish line would be amazing.

I was up for it. After all I had been through in the last few years, I was eager to really challenge myself, both mentally and physically, and to raise money in memory of my brother and sister. It felt good. As Sammy and I started running across the start line with the hundreds of other runners beside us it felt surreal. I felt very tearful and overwhelmed as well as excited. Sammy reminded me to start off slowly, not to rush with the excitement of it all, because I would burn out too soon. She said, 'Remember, Mum, pace yourself and you've got this.' After a mile or so I lost sight of her in the distance and I just kept calm and remembered my training tips. The support of family and friends along the way was incredible. It is amazing how one minute you are flagging then you suddenly hear a familiar voice in the distance shouting your name and you look up and feel so re-energised.

I was genuinely surprised how good I felt at the halfway mark. It was the last few miles that were a struggle, mainly because I had this fear of 'hitting the wall', something so many people talk about: when you struggle to run near the end of the marathon. I just kept saying to myself, 'Stopping is not an option, stopping is not an option', over and over again, and