

Hold My Hand

A Mother's Journey

Glenys Carl

Published by Pan

Extract

All text is copyright of the author

l♥verereading.co.uk

If you love reading, you'll love the unique benefits of lovereading.co.uk. You can download and print off the opening extracts of books, be guided by our exclusive author 'like-for-like' recommendation service and receive regular email updates of new books in your favourite genres. And it's all completely free. **Just turn to lovereading.co.uk today!**



One

On a snowy night, in a flat on the outskirts of Stuttgart, Germany, the harsh rasp of a phone shocks me from my dream with the subtlety of an air-raid siren. I manage to crack one eye open enough to see the glow of the clock: 1:00 A.M. Who would be calling at this hour? And on a Sunday morning. I give my German boyfriend Stefan a small shove with my bare heel that hardly rocks his six-foot frame. Surely he can't sleep through this clamour. I shove him again, harder.

'Hallo,' Stefan says groggily. 'Ja. Sie ist hier.' He rolls over and sticks the receiver to my ear. 'For you.'

Sitting up, I fumble to untangle the phone cord. Who would it be? After only seven months in Stuttgart I have made few friends. My boys wouldn't be calling at this hour. The oldest, Samuel, is working in Connecticut; Jonathan, my middle son, is at university in Denmark. My youngest, Scott, is away in Australia, finding himself and his strength as a young adult on a new adventure. Unless something dreadful has happened.

'Hello?' My voice is thin and scratchy.

'Is this Mrs Carl?' It's a man's voice, deep and resonant and very Australian.

Hold My Hand

Still trapped in the web of sleep, I hesitate before answering. 'Yes.'

'Do you have a son named Scott Carl?'

The question hits me like wind-blown hail. 'Yes,' I whisper.

'I'm with the Sydney Police Department. I'm sorry to be the one bearing this news, but there has been a serious accident. Your son was found unconscious, in a coma.'

'No, no!' My maternal denial kicks into gear. 'Not my baby. Are you sure?' The news is impossible to take in. Please, God, let this be a dream.

'Are you there, Mrs Carl?'

'What happened?' I ask. Stefan clicks on the table light, burning my eyes and filling the room with disorienting shadows.

'Your son was found in the basement of his block of flats. We've taken him to St Vincent's Hospital.'

'How did it happen?' I keep saying.

'We don't know. He wasn't able to speak. I regret to tell you that he may not last the night. Can you come immediately?'

'Yes, of course. Oh, my God. I'll be there as soon as I can. Please tell Scott I'm coming. Tell him to hang on.'

'Let me give you some phone numbers,' the Australian says uncomfortably, knowing there is precious little else he can do.

Stefan ruffles about the bedside table for a pencil. As I scribble the numbers of the hospital and police station on a scrap of paper, I glance at my boyfriend and catch the glint of sadness in his eyes, as if he senses our life together has changed for ever. My mind is already rushing halfway around the world; my body will soon follow.

I dial the hospital with shaky fingers and request the Intensive

Hold My Hand

Care Unit. A nurse answers and I explain who I am. 'How is Scott doing?' I ask, still unbelieving, still hoping to prove the policeman wrong.

'He's about to go into surgery,' the nurse answers in a kind but professional manner. 'We're trying to relieve pressure on his brain. I would suggest you come right over. Where are you calling from?'

'Germany.'

'I see.' The nurse quiets as she wrestles with the distance. 'Do try to hurry. The doctor will call when there is more news.'

Tears stream down my face as I pass the phone back to Stefan. I plead with God not to let my baby die. I want to hold him, to climb into bed with him and tell him all is okay, as I did when he was a small child afraid of thunder. He should not die without his family at his side. I take a deep breath and wipe my face. It's time to pull myself together. Time to be strong. I must get to Australia.



Only a week before, my twenty-one-year-old son had called me from Sydney with glowing tales of life down under. The beach, the sun, the sense of freedom. The easiness of the people. His flat on Potts Hill was right on the ocean. He could watch the sunrises. He was in heaven. 'Morn, guess what: I'm going to play rugby for the Sydney Welsh Rugby Team.' He was over-the-moon excited, telling me that he would be training hard, sleeping more, running each day a little further, eating better. His enthusiasm was catching. I reminisced about how I'd go watch my boyfriend play rugby when I was a teenager, and how it was such a part of Welsh life: the singing, the playing, the roar of the crowd, and after the game, the camaraderie.

There and then I wanted to hold him but he was in another land

Hold My Hand

finding out about himself. I could just imagine his big grin when he called to tell me about playing against the Kings Cross Bushwhackers: 'It was great, I scored twice and was given the Best and Fairest Players Award. We lost but that's okay; they're a big tough club.'

'That's wonderful, Scott.' I was so proud – such an impressive award.

'It's not a big deal Mom, the award,' he said with a disarming laugh. 'You see, my position was flyback. One of my mates pitched me the ball and I had a good shot at another score, but when I was tackled by this big fellow, one of their "piggies", he hit me pretty hard. When I was down he added an elbow.'

'That sounds awful,' I gasped.

My son was athletic, with broad shoulders and great strength for his size, but he was not the most imposing. Rugby is such a rough game.

'Are you sure you're all right?'

'I'm fine. My ribs are a little sore, but you know how it is when you're the new kid in town. He probably wanted to see if I'd get up. Anyway, a couple of mates said the ref should have called a penalty, but he didn't. So they were all steamed to lay out their flyback. I told them to forget it – it was probably an accident. Besides, Mom, you always said getting even doesn't solve anything. For some reason that tackle and scoring twice got me the award.'

Scott typically shrugged it off; in a couple of days he'd be right as rain. He could never accept that meanness was deliberate.

'You will love this, Mom. After the game in the clubhouse, the team sang the Welsh National Anthem, "Hen Wlad fy Nhadau" – Land of My Fathers. It's great; I'll sing it for you sometime. Well, I

Hold My Hand

have to go now.' These were his final words. 'Love you. Have you heard of that song?'

'Yes, sweetie. I loved to sing it to you in Welsh when you were a child, and as a baby on those colicky nights.'



Should I call Sammy, my eldest son? I can't even think what time it might be in Connecticut. What about Jonathan, my middle one? Knowing he faces exams and will run a marathon later this week, I decide to let him sleep. My concern is for naught: Jonathan calls a few minutes later, having already heard from Sammy. The Australians have called everyone they can locate. Jonathan wants to come with me but I tell him no, that he should let me go first and see the situation. I assure him Scott will be fine. Will he? I wish I was sure. Here I am trying to keep everyone else calm while I'm on the verge of coming apart.

After Jonathan hangs up, I sit with the quilt wrapped tightly round my body, drop my head onto my bent knees and close my eyes to gather strength.

Oh, Scotty, my Scotty, born in England, growing to exuberant manhood in America, near death in Australia. I will battle the world to be at your side.



In emotional turmoil, I circle the flat wondering what to fit into the tattered suitcase lying open in the contour of the warm spot in our bed. What does one pack for someone in a coma? Memories perhaps, friendly and familiar? Scott's brown Paddington teddy bear

Hold My Hand

is unearthed from my cupboard of keepsakes. And his music. Yes, I mustn't forget his music. The Spyro Gyro tapes Scott left at Christmas are assigned a corner niche. A few photos will be helpful when he comes out of the coma.

From the cupboard I retrieve a small antique cherrywood chest I had just bought the day before, a special place to keep my photos of the children, the few I could afford when they were still young, and select a handful. There's the one of us all walking on the beach in Westport, Connecticut, another of Scott fishing, and a more recent one of the three brothers laughing together over Sunday night dinner, their heads together as they compare peach-fuzz beards.

Yesterday was May Day and the first warm day of the year. Stefan's two brothers appeared out of the blue. Wolfgang had come from Munich, and Eckhart from outside Hamburg. Neither knew the other was coming. Wolfgang is an appraiser of castle antiques, and travels widely throughout Europe. Thanks to him our flat is adorned with elegant seventeenth- and eighteenth-century furniture. No sooner had Stefan's brothers arrived than we were off to the antique market in the small city of Tübingen. It was like a journey into the past, the open market crowded with eager shoppers, bright red and golden yellow flags snapping in the wind and string music from musicians in medieval garb. I bought the antique cherrywood chest in a fit of sentimentality.

After extracting the photos, I close my chest of memories, slowly run my hand over its polished top and return it to the cupboard.

After the Tübingen market, the three brothers rowed me about Lake Neckar in a flat-bottomed wood boat painted bright white with green stripes. Laughing and splashing, we were ecstatic about the return of warm weather, however temporary it would prove. Later,

Hold My Hand

home for dinner, a headache suddenly overcame me. I rarely get headaches and found the throbbing pain in my temple odd. Slipping into the bathroom for aspirin, I glanced in the mirror and noticed my left eyelid had grown red and puffy. Stefan looked at my eye and suggested an insect had bitten me at the lake. Perhaps so, but I didn't remember it happening.

Despite the headache, an unusual sensation of warmth flowed through my body. Perhaps it was because I had raised three sons and here I was enjoying the company of three grown brothers. Later that night, as I drifted into a contented sleep, the warmth continued and I dreamt sweetly of my boys. We were so far apart, yet strangely I had never felt so close. That was when the phone rudely jarred me awake.

Hours later, at four a.m., as I haphazardly pack for Australia, my mind a jumble of emotions, the phone rings again.

'For you,' Stefan says.

I grab it from his hand and slide onto the bed next to my suitcase. 'Yes,' I whisper.

'This is Dr Croches calling.' The calm voice in my ear is distant and surreal, speaking from another planet. 'I'm a neurosurgeon at St Vincent's Hospital in Sydney. Your son has just come out of surgery. He's still in a coma, but we were able to relieve some of the pressure on his brain.'

'Do you know what happened?' I interrupt.

'Well, not exactly. It appears that he was hit in the left eye and fell about twenty feet. The evidence suggests his head struck the cement floor. I'm told he was not found for about ten hours.'

I touch my swollen left eye and recall my headache. 'Please, please save him,' I plead.

Hold My Hand

'We're doing our best,' Doctor Croches replies. 'We'll know more after we run some tests.' There is something in his voice that warns me he knows more than he is telling.

'I'll be on the next available flight,' I hasten to assure him.



At the bathroom sink, I wash the tears from my eyes and study myself in the mirror. My sandy-blond hair, usually a bit wild, has become a shoulder-length rat's nest. I must have gone to bed with my hair still damp from the lake. Thin bolts of red lightning accent the whites of my blue eyes; my left eye socket is now circled with a bluish bruise. Half-heartedly I run a brush through the tangles before giving up. Who cares how I look anyway?

Rooted by a sense of helplessness, I turn to gaze out the bathroom window into the first light of day. Although it is May the mornings are still dark, the trees still naked and the skies leaden with grey. It has started to snow. Tiny snowflakes drift gently earthward through stark-black boughs. Water drips down the windowpane like tears as I look out and think of Scott.

Where will I find the strength for this journey? I am frightened and dig deep inside me for courage. Just yesterday, the cold world outside this window had been so warm and friendly, filled with eternal hope. Today I am overcome with anxiety and a sense of urgency. A mother protects her children at all costs. I can do this. *I must do it.* I will make it to Scott and he will be waiting for me.

I stand before my open, half-packed suitcase wondering what else to include, but draw a blank. Snapping it shut, I stand it on the floor.

Stefan has been on the phone dialling one number after another,

Hold My Hand

relieved to have something to do besides watch in helpless silence. He has me booked on a flight from Stuttgart to London Heathrow. The next 747 from London to Sydney leaves tonight, and to depart London I'll need an Australian visa. But it's Sunday morning and the Australian Consulate in Bonn is closed. Stefan tries the police. They are sympathetic but unable to help. Losing patience, I take the phone and dial the consulate's emergency number, finally rousing a clerk. With my situation stated and restated emphatically, I am eventually transferred to the duty officer.

'Sorry, but the consul is at a hotel for a private breakfast,' the duty officer explains in a drowsy voice. 'Call back tomorrow.'

I am in no mood for niceties. Polite but firm, I guilt him into revealing the phone number of the hotel. I dial again and insist on speaking with the consul. I am learning how to cajole and salt my pleadings with words like 'life' and 'death' and 'emergency'. Moments later an authoritative voice comes on.

'Yes, madam,' the consul responds crisply, his Australian patience strained, suiting a man dragged from his bratwurst and eggs.

Suppressing my frustration, I explain my predicament for the nth time.

'I understand your plight, Mrs Carl, but countries have strict rules,' he replies firmly. 'You will need a visa to enter Australia.'

His inability to understand confuses me. What is there about 'death' and 'emergency' this man fails to grasp? My voice raises one notch of urgency. Again, I explain the severity of my situation. Professionally polite, the consul invites me to visit his office the next morning.

'But it's a ten-hour drive to Bonn and then back,' I press. 'That's two days on the road; two days of lost precious time. Don't you

Hold My Hand

understand?' I press harder adding a steely edge to my voice. 'My son is dying *now*. I can't wait until Monday. *You're* the only one who can help me. How can you get me on the plane to Sydney tonight?' I refuse to let him off the phone and his breakfast is getting cold.

I hear an aggravated sigh. 'Truly, I'm very sorry,' the consul says again, this time with less conviction, 'but there is nothing I can do.'

I am near panic now. My mind is racing. There has to be an angle. Where's his soft spot? 'I must ask you one thing, sir. Do you have children?' I wait. The silence drags. I sense his discomfort.

The consul clears his throat. 'Perhaps I might fax the airlines an authorization, some form of waiver,' he says quietly.

'Yes. Yes, a waiver.' That would be perfect.

'I'll see if someone can meet you in Sydney, to stamp your passport at that end. We can try it. That's the best I can do.'

'Thank you, thank you.'

'I'll do what I can, Mrs Carl. Best of luck.'



Stefan drives me the fifteen kilometres to Stuttgart's Echterdingen Airport. Absently, I watch the wintry German landscape slip by. Light snow still falls and traffic slows to a crawl. The windscreen wipers slap away the white froth. Sensing my mood of detachment Stefan drives in silence, a silence that seems only to magnify the growing gulf between us. I shift uncomfortably in the seat.

Stefan is a good man but not the same man I fell in love with a little over three years ago.



Hold My Hand

I was with friends at Sunday brunch in the garden restaurant of an old inn in Westport, Connecticut when I first noticed him sitting behind me at another table. By chance we began to talk and I was instantly attracted to his quick laugh and the way it sparked his blue-grey eyes. Tall and athletic with a gentle face and a strong jawline, Stefan was thirty-nine at the time and a computer engineer doing work for Mercedes Benz. I was a few years older, raising three teenage boys. We dated for three years before he announced his company was transferring him back to Stuttgart.

'Come with me,' he had implored. 'You must experience Germany. I promise, if you don't like it I will stay only one year and we will return.' By that time my boys were sufficiently independent, and I agreed. One year would not be difficult, so I believed.

But I had not adjusted well. The winter was long, dark and wet. Stefan worked all day and quickly regressed into the way his mother and German society had raised him to be. On my own I worked hard to adapt, but there seemed to be an indecipherable code of strict rules and customs. I laboured to learn German, but feared to open my mouth because every word I mispronounced brought an instant and humourless Teutonic correction from neighbours and shopkeepers.

In our block of flats a large black placard appeared on our door when it was my turn to sweep the stairwell, shovel the pavement, or wash the windows, even when encrusted with ice. My easy-going lightheartedness silently died and I was left feeling joyless and empty. Stefan never again spoke of returning to Westport, as he had promised.

The full import of Stefan's German conditioning did not hit me

Hold My Hand

until the first time we visited his childhood home to meet his parents. They lived in a comfortable, middle-class, three-storey house made of dark brick with a steeply pitched roof of grey slate. It was set behind a green hedge and flanked by a row of mature winter trees. Approaching their front door, Stefan overtly threw my hand away and moved two steps in front of me. Only later was I to learn he had been cautioned not to bring his previously married, mother of three children, Welsh girlfriend home with him.

The matron of the house, Madame Heller, short in hair, stature and temperament, greeted her son with nothing more than a firm handshake and a flurry of German instructions. She sternly whisked me away to a guestroom, well separated from Stefan's bedroom.

'You'll take this room,' Madame ordered in perfect English.

It was her house, and if she did not wish to acknowledge that her son and I slept together that was fair enough. Instead of recognizing my fatigue and offering me a rest while she and Stefan headed for the supermarket, Madame Heller ordered me to unpack the suitcases, iron her son's clothing and hang it in the fresh air. I kept waiting for Stefan to intercede and stick up for me but he accepted his mother's dominance without a hint of protest.

With Stefan's clothing dutifully waving in the breeze, I explored the rest of the house and joyfully discovered a piano in the living room. This alone would make my visit tolerable and I quickly reacquainted myself with the beauty of the instrument by wading into Beethoven's 'Moonlight Sonata', albeit raggedly and in my own key. I missed my piano. I had started playing on my grandmother's piano when I was four years old, just tapping out little tunes I would make up. During the war, under siege with the German bombing of my native city of Cardiff in Wales, my grandmother moved her

Hold My Hand

piano down into the family air-raid shelter so they might enjoy music by candlelight during those long, dangerous nights. Stefan had promised to buy me one, but like his talk of returning to Westport, nothing had come of it.

My imaginative rendition of 'Moonlight Sonata' had drawn Stefan's father, Dr Heller, to the room. A kindly man in his sixties, grinning broadly, he withdrew sheet music from the piano bench and demonstrated his talents as a classical pianist with passion and grace. For the first time I felt welcome. At least we could communicate through our music. But our private concert came to an abrupt halt when Madame stormed into the room. Slamming the keyboard shut she ordered, 'Stop that noise! We have no time for such nonsense.'

Later, I asked Stefan why he never told me his father was such an accomplished musician. 'I didn't know,' he replied sadly.

After several days, when Stefan and I were about to depart, Madame appeared with a stack of freshly pressed underwear and pyjamas. The label 'Stefan Heller' had been carefully sewn into the waistband of each, as if she were sending her son off to summer camp. Stefan, who would have made great fun of this in America, remained silent, his eyes downcast.



As Stefan manoeuvres his Mercedes onto the airport road, it strikes me that I am really leaving this place. Dressed in brown snow pants, a yellow silk blouse and laced-up fur-lined winter boots, I have nothing but a suitcase full of memories, several hundred American dollars and a heavy heart. Everything else I have left in Stefan's flat. My instinct tells me I will never see this man, or my belongings,

Hold My Hand

again. I've always professed my roots are in myself, not in my possessions, and now my challenge is to live what I preach.

Stefan finally breaks the silence. 'When will you be back?' The thinness of his voice tells me he knows the answer.

'I don't know,' I say, avoiding his look.

But I do know. Germany will never be my home again. Still, my relationship with him feels uncomfortably unfinished. I think of my cherrywood chest filled with the rarest of all my treasures, the baby photos of my boys. Certainly I'll be back for that. Won't I?

Arriving at the airport departure kerb, I suddenly realize I have forgotten my jacket. The fresh snow has dropped the temperature back to winter digits and my teeth chatter uncontrollably. Clothing had seemed so unimportant when I was packing. Stefan assures me he will send it along to Australia, if I need it, then leaves me with a final silent hug. I hurry inside to join the ticket queue.

I've had only three hours' sleep in the last thirty-six, but still I cannot sleep on the London-bound plane. My body is a raging battleground between the forces of adrenaline and exhaustion. At least I'm moving forward, one step closer to Scott. After a few hours' stopover I'll catch a British Airways night flight to Sydney, via Dubai and Singapore. I pray to God that Scott will survive, that I will reach him in time and my love will piece him back together. Deep in my soul I know he's waiting for me. My guardian angels have never let me down. As long as the airline received the consul's fax, as long as I maintain momentum, who needs sleep?

But the stone faces of the agents at the British Airways counter at Heathrow tell me a different story. They have no idea what I'm talking about. 'Passports need to be stamped before you can fly,'

Hold My Hand

states a round man with a balding head and thick sideburns. 'Those are the rules.'

'But the Australian Consul made special arrangements. Didn't you get his fax?'

'Oh that,' the round man says. 'Yes, we received that fax. But we don't accept faxed waivers. How do we know it's real? Maybe your Australian lover faxed you a visa waiver to spare you the trouble.'

My knees tremble in anger. I'm utterly exhausted, but furious at his insinuation. This time my rat-nest hair and blackened eye become assets. Looking a little crazy can't hurt. I lean into the counter and glower.

'It takes fifteen minutes to get a visa when the consulate is open,' I say icily. 'Do I look like the kind of person who would go to all this trouble to hunt down the consul on a Sunday morning just to save fifteen minutes? Look in my passport. Go ahead. I've never been to Australia before. How could I possibly have a boyfriend there? And even if I did, why would he break the law to spend a few days with me?' I lower my voice and say adamantly, '*My son is dying*. Don't you understand?'

The agent is unmoved. 'Then you'll need to get your passport stamped at the consulate in London tomorrow morning. That's how the system works.'

'My passport will be stamped in Australia,' I fairly shout, my face flushing red. 'The consul told you that.'

I try to calm myself. Pleading worked with the consul, and maybe that's the key here. But these stone faces have heard it all. Every bloody story mankind has invented has been tried on these people. I am in tears by now and if this doesn't work the wrath of a pious

Hold My Hand

Welsh mother who has been praying to God since early this morning will descend upon their heads. Reason abandons me and I persevere on willpower alone.

'You can call St Vincent's Hospital yourself,' I tell him coldly. 'If that doesn't work, call the Sydney police.' I tear a corner off a piece of official-looking paper and scribble. 'Here are their numbers. I will wait right here.'

The agent is taken aback. 'Most irregular,' he mumbles, reluctantly accepting the scrap of paper. 'Please, go and sit down. We will try to sort this out.' Turning his attention to the queue, he motions with a hand: 'Next in line, please!'

The 747 is loading while I sit in desperation on the concrete floor, my knees drawn tight to my chest, gently rocking. My yellow silk blouse is pasted to the perspiration on my back. My heart begins to race; my breathing builds fuller, louder. *I must get on this plane.* What's the key? What haven't I thought of yet?

Bolting to the counter, I demand, 'You must let me on that plane. Or else.'

Or else what? What could I do? What would make them feel threatened by me? But the breaking voice of this wild-haired woman teetering on the edge of destruction certainly has his attention. I look the little balding man directly in the eye, trying to connect with his soul. Surely he has a family. Surely there is someone he loves. 'What have you found out?' I demand. 'Did you speak to the hospital? Did you call the police?'

'We did.' The agent exhales exasperation and throws up his hands. 'Look, I don't doubt your story but that still doesn't solve our problem of no visa.'

The final call for the flight is announced. I have to act now.

Hold My Hand

Taking a deep breath, I launch my assault. 'How would you like it if I climbed up on this ticket counter and shouted to the entire airport what you're doing to me?'

His eyes widen. 'Most irregular,' he mutters. This is not proper British behaviour, his nervous hands tell me.

A few people have stopped to listen. I raise my voice. 'I'll call the newspapers; I'll call the television stations; I'll scream on the steps of parliament; I'll tell the whole bloody world that my son is dying and your stone-faced airline cares more about their stupid rules and stamped bits of paper than it does about a mother who is trying to reach her dying son!'

The agent swallows and silently surveys my determined stare. Sizing up my menacing five-foot-two Welsh frame and my seven stone of quaking fury, he wisely slips me a boarding pass across the counter.