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SWIMMING ON MY OWN
(THE BUSINESS CASE FOR KINDNESS AND EQUALITY)

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Born into inner city poverty against a backdrop of racist and misogynistic 1960s Britain, Susie finally ‘made it’ becoming a self-made multi-millionaire at 58 years old. Admittedly slower than some entrepreneurs, but she got there in the end.

Sick of working for bullies and misogynists she decided to set up her own company with her best friend’s daughter, Brady Last. They started in her small conservatory on two laptops and with a large stash of Yorkshire tea bags. The kids had left home so she thought she should do something risky for once in her life.

She put her entire savings into starting a business even though there were no clients in sight. Susie wanted her own brand, one that had design and her quirky humour at its heart. She wanted to create a company culture based on respect and kindness and managed to convince Brady to join her in this one last hurrah.

Competitors laughed at them, banks wouldn’t give them an overdraft (never mind a loan), and rivals tried to put them out of business. Five years later it was sold in a multi-million pound deal to a blue chip multinational. How did she build a buy-out in such a short time and from scratch?

Susie has made waves as a woman in business, and here she sets out the things she learnt along the way and with a bit of luck, if she can do it, why can’t you?

To Kate and JoJo, the two most beautiful,
funny and clever women in my world
and to Simon who made me truly happy again.

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CHAPTER 1

Taking the plunge

**“Don’t wait for
your ship to come
in – swim out to it.”**

Steve Southerland

This book is dedicated to every kind and thoughtful person out there who is trying to juggle work and home and struggling to find a balance. I salute you.

I was going to write this anonymously because I was afraid of the abuse I would get and the people I might upset. But I think that rather defeats the object. My birth name is Susan Griffiths, but I was Sue Nelson for 34 years. I'm not a child, although I was often made to feel like one by bullies in my workplace, social circle and home life. After decades of keeping quiet and keeping things to myself, I've decided to exchange the safety of silence for the highly vulnerable position of speaking out about how the world of business is unbelievably biased.

I think I had huge potential even from the beginning, but I often squandered it by allowing myself to be held back. I was complicit in it, but in my defence the inequality and bullying was so overwhelming that I usually retreated into being passive and accommodating.

All that changed in 2016 when, at 54 years old, I finally ran out of patience, or maybe I just got brave. I really didn't care anymore because my career was practically over, so was my marriage, I had nothing to lose. My hair was grey (although carefully coloured) and my wrinkles deep. That's when you're dangerous, because if you don't care, no one has any leverage over you.

Four things happened that made me decide to write this book. First it was the #metoo movement, secondly there was Donald Trump, third I became rather wealthy after selling my business and later, there was the tragic murder of Sarah Everard. I want to explain that even though others might lie, cheat, steal and terrorise their way to the top, nice people

don't necessarily come last or succumb to a terrible fate. We can succeed too.

#metoo hit a chord for me, but only because it was how I was starting to think anyway. It's not a rallying cry that I joined. Contrary to media opinion it's not a group or a campaign either. You won't find me getting a #metoo tattoo, or any tattoo for that matter because my mum told me they're common.



'Women's Day of Action', Miami

When it surfaced it was such a relief to know that I wasn't the only one who'd suffered sexual harassment and the constant background hum of misogyny for years and years and years. Not just socially but in business. Crucially, I started to think that maybe it wasn't something I'd brought on myself, there were others. Not hundreds of them but millions. I also felt the need to explain that despite setbacks, making very big mistakes and outrageous bias you can still make it, even when facing unwarranted aggression, misogyny, racism, ageism and/or homophobia.



‘Women Against Sexual Harassment’, Rome

I wanted to speak out for people that usually don’t have a voice. Those of us who keep quiet, both male and female, because we’re not as well educated, or privileged or we’re shy or just intimidated by what is sometimes described as the ‘alpha males’ that disproportionately occupy key positions in our society. They’re powerful but I’m going to be brave because too often they get there by being utter bastards and it’s not right. I’ve called them out in this book and I think I have shown that their behaviour just doesn’t fit the modern world anymore and in the long term it too often goes disastrously wrong.

I managed to create a business from scratch without any help and sell it just five years later to a multi-billion pound international company. I think I did it with kindness and with a great respect for true equality. I’ve learnt so much

along the way and also made some howling mistakes but I believe it's proved that good people can succeed. Given all that experience it seems such a waste not to share it because I hope, just hope it might help other entrepreneurs, especially those where it's not quite working out just now.

Finally, I'm not anti-male or believe that women are totally virtuous and can't be bullies too. Of course not. It's just that I heard Jude Kelly* say once that we need a new set of stories to describe what inequality feels like, not what it looks like, so I thought . . . well, here's one for you.

*Judith Kelly CBE, Artistic Director of the Southbank Centre in London and Founder of Women of the World Festival speaking at the Change Makers 2018 event at Bloomberg, London 24 April.