Suzie Fletcher, one of the warm and friendly faces on *The Repair Shop*, is a master saddler who has honed her craft over four decades – she can bring even the most weathered leather artefact back to life. But Suzie herself has also been through a process of change, reflection and healing.

In her first book Suzie looks back over her life – from England to Colorado and back again – and unpacks the laughter, grief, hard graft and love that has come along the way. A self-confessed free spirit with a deep connection to nature, she recalls the places, people, horses and experiences that have shaped the person she is today.

Full of Suzie's exceptional warmth, zest for life and wisdom, *The Sun Over the Mountains* is a story of courage, hope and restoration.

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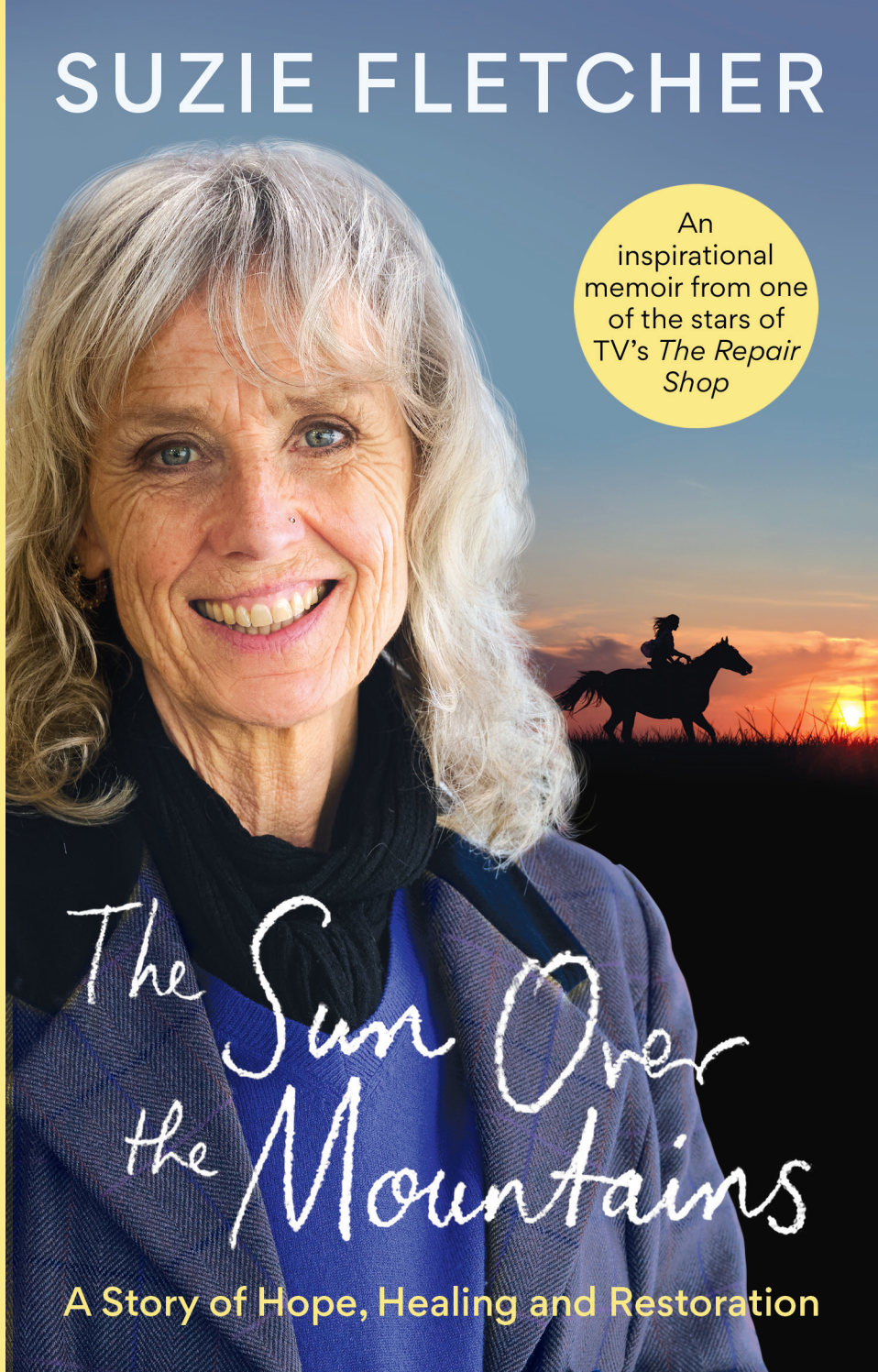
SUZIE FLETCHER

The Sun Over the Mountains



SUZIE FLETCHER

An inspirational memoir from one of the stars of TV's *The Repair Shop*

The Sun Over the Mountains

A Story of Hope, Healing and Restoration

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Suzie Fletcher asserts the moral right to be identified as the author of this work.

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'Life is not a journey to the grave with the intention of arriving safely in a well-preserved body, but rather to skid in broadside, thoroughly used up, totally worn out, and loudly proclaiming, "Wow! What a ride!"'

Hunter S. Thompson, *The Proud Highway: Saga of a Desperate Southern Gentleman, 1955–1967*

Dedicated to Ken Langford, master saddler, mentor and father figure.

Disclaimer
The stories in this book reflect the author's recollection of events. Some names, locations and identifying characteristics have been changed to protect the privacy of those depicted. Dialogue has been recreated from memory.

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Introduction

The sun was shining on the morning in July in 2017 when I made my way to the big barn at the Weald & Downland Living Museum to film my first-ever episode of *The Repair Shop*. My heart was in my boots as I walked on set. Part of me didn't want to be there at all but I said I would do this, so I had no choice. I kept reminding myself that I was lucky to be given such an amazing opportunity at my age, and I told myself to just 'put on my big girl pants and do it'.

So, I smiled brightly and got on with it. There is a theory that if you smile – even if it's fake – then it can trick your head into thinking you're happy. The thing is, I was feeling totally out of my depth. I'd only been back in the UK for five weeks, having been in the USA for over twenty years. Over there I'd been married, had my own farm filled with horses and dogs and built my business in saddlery. While I was packing to move back to the UK, my big brother Steve had started on *The Repair Shop*. During various video calls, he told me how much he loved doing it. 'Well, if they ever need a leather expert then tell them about me,' I joked. It really was a throwaway comment, but Steve went away and asked the production team. I never ever imagined they'd say 'yes' and that I'd be on the show.

By the time I got back to England, I was exhausted. I was mentally, physically and emotionally wrung out. I'd packed a lot of love, laughter, hard graft and grief into those 22 years I'd been away. I thought that when I got back to England, I would take my time to recover and recharge my batteries, but I'm grateful that I made that playful suggestion to Steve. He understands me better than anybody else, and he knew it was a safe environment at *The Repair Shop*. Of all people, he would never put me in a position where I couldn't cope.

But I was on wobbly legs. I had no confidence and was at such a low ebb. I'd come home, and it had changed drastically from when I left. I didn't have my own home or workshop, which are like anchors for me. The previous years had battered my self-confidence and my soul. I'd lost my husband, my parents, my aunty, friends and a troupe of beloved animals. In a funny way, now that I was back in England, I was mourning the loss of America too. Life out there is so convenient. Suddenly, I was at home and everything felt foreign. I needed to adjust to the different attitudes and way of life. In a sense, I had to learn how to live in the UK again.

I knew this was going to take time, but then I jumped straight in the deep end at *The Repair Shop*. Specialist silversmith Brenton West was a newbie that day too. Ben the director introduced me to him and everybody else in the barn. Then he showed me my bench. It was a classic 'first day in the office' scenario except it was going to be filmed – imagine that?

Ben told me to set up at my bench then make my way over to the welcome bench because my item was coming in.

'I've never done this before,' I told Ben. 'Would you mind if I just watch and see how it goes?'

'Errr no,' answered Ben. 'That's not how it works.'

And, before I knew it, I was meeting Tom, my first-ever contributor on the show.

He turned up with this terrific old Louis Vuitton trunk. It had been custom-made for Tom's great-grandfather. It had been left in a damp place and the leather was worn and fragile. On the surface, there were dings and dents, but its frame was strong so I knew I could repair it. However, I was nowhere near as confident as I looked on screen – my bashes and bruises were on the inside.

Fortunately, Steve was by my side to help support me in figuring out what to do. It was great to have his help. He assisted me as I drilled out each rivet and made them so I could reuse them. New hinges, over straps (made to look old) and a lot of love and saddle soap brought that trunk back to life.

Not long after that first day, I met Jay for the first time. He spoke to the group, but he didn't come up and say 'hello' to me, so I really felt like the new kid that nobody was going to talk to. I'm not one of these gregarious people that goes up and says 'hi'. Usually, I just hang back until the opportunity presents itself and then I'll introduce myself. It was quite a while before Jay and I had a proper chat, and I had lots of questions, the main one being how he made it look so easy.

'I'll be honest,' I told him. 'I feel a bit lost.'

'Stop there,' Jay told me. 'This is very, very simple. The only thing you've got to do is be yourself. You are unique and that's why you've been hired. Don't try to be something you're not because the viewers will see through that.'

'But I'm not that good.'

'You are,' Jay said. 'You just don't realize it.'

Jay and I talked for hours that night after filming. He shared his life story, and even though we come from very different backgrounds, we are both dyslexic and have had our share of hard knocks. I felt an incredible connection with him and had an appreciation of what a remarkable person he is. He has this good heart and I feel very grateful that he was part of the team because he, along with my brother, really helped me to start to believe in myself again. That late-night chat with Jay was a turning point for me; it was the beginning of my own restoration.

Being part of *The Repair Shop* has healed me from the inside out. Using my skills in such a positive way has brought me joy and confidence. I don't think any of that would have been possible without such a caring group of people around me. Steve, Jay, the team of experts, the camera crew, the producers, the directors and the people behind the scenes making things tick have always been kind and believed in me. If I've ever been worried or run into a problem, their very first words have been: 'What can we do to help? What do you need?' This changes the dynamics of everything. If people are willing to go to great lengths to make things work for you, it makes you want to do your best and pass on the same generosity of spirit. It's simple and effective – I'd love to see it in every sector of society.

I talked with Ben about my very first appearance on the show quite some time afterwards. It's funny how we all have our own versions of events. I was beside myself with worry that day, but Ben said he was quietly confident in me. In fact, midway through filming, he gave one of the camera guys a nod of approval and said, 'She's got it.' Years of television experience and he recognized something in me that I just didn't. It was lovely to hear this from Ben. It wasn't about

ego; I was just pleased I was getting it right. Most of us are our own worst critic. Negative voices in our heads can affect how we interact with other people and how we conduct our business. Most of us are trying to be the best version of ourselves, but it can be hard work. Validation from somebody else is a real boost and was definitely part of my healing.

I've restored countless things since that big old trunk. The show consistently pushes all the experts into new areas, and I have to dig deep every time to deliver too. Each job is a challenge; whether it's a crushed shoe, a beloved toy, a bashed-about bag or a tired old chair. I'm in awe of everyone who brings in these precious belongings, so I take the responsibility for repairing them very seriously and my focus is always on the truly important stuff: getting this right for the contributor and not worrying how things appear on camera. And even though it's being filmed and could become impersonal, I do feel the connection between me and the contributor. The emotions I show when I give the item back are authentic. I really do hold my breath until they say, 'thank you'. I watch their faces and the expressions in their eyes tell me all I need to know. Only when I see they're happy do I let go and breathe again.

All my jobs have been emotional in one way or another, but the rocking horse repair was a watershed moment. The wooden horse was brought in by Julie for Will to repair. The horse was a gift to her from her parents when she was a girl. Later when she had children with her husband Paul, they did their own restoration of the rocking horse so their boys could play on it. It wasn't professional but it was done with love, and Paul signed and dated it under the saddle. Years afterwards, Julie and Paul decided to restore the horse properly for their grandchildren. Around this

time, Paul fell ill and the family were devastated when he was diagnosed with terminal cancer. Paul died before he could do anything with the horse so Julie hoped the team at *The Repair Shop* could help. She asked Will to look for Paul's signature and preserve it if the pen hadn't been rubbed away. We were all rooting for it to be there…

The handwriting of a loved one after they have gone is something very special. I have precious notes and cards from my late husband Rob. Some of the words were scribbled on scraps of paper, but I cherish and take comfort from them when I look at them from time to time, so I understood Julie's request. Will began the restoration of the body of the horse then he brought it over to me so I could make new leatherwork. I'd been told the story behind the horse and, because I lost Rob to terminal cancer, I was already feeling a deep connection to the project. By then, I'd done a few episodes of the show, so I was beginning to feel stronger. My confidence was growing, and I was settling into my role. I absolutely thought I could handle what was coming.

'I really hope it's here,' I said as I peeled the leather away. As soon as I saw Paul's signature, I was biting my lip to keep back the tears. But sometimes there is no holding back grief, and that's when I revealed on camera the tragedy of my own life and how I had lost my husband to cancer. Thank goodness Steve was there to hold me as I felt the waves of loss pass through my own body. I didn't expect to break down like this, but the trigger was enormous and I'd kept things bottled up for so long.

Somehow, we got through that scene, and I escaped outside. I just walked around the place and tried to get myself under control. But I couldn't stop. Just when I thought I was calm enough to go

back inside the barn, another wave hit me. Some days you have to ride the waves and know that they will pass.

I was so pleased for Julie and her children that Paul's signature and the date were there. And after the tears, I felt some relief and was able to get on with the job. I was soon back in the zone, lost and completely absorbed in my work. I made an entirely new saddle and embellished it with gold foil embossing. I got on with the matching bridle and leather straps. By the time it was ready for Julie, it looked beautiful. On the day she came back to the barn, she didn't know about the date and Paul's signature. When I took the saddle off to show her, she was absolutely stunned and quite emotional. I understood how she felt, as a widow myself I had that extra layer of sensitivity, but at the time she didn't know about my own loss.

This episode was another turning point for me, and I think for the show as a whole. It was one of the first times one of us had been caught off guard and we revealed our raw emotions. The production company did ask for my permission to use the footage. I chose to keep it in because it was real life caught on camera, and it was honest. I suspect that most viewers thought all my tears were for my husband. They were, but it was much more complicated, and I had a ton of other emotions bubbling under the surface. I loved and missed my husband Rob with all my heart but there was a more serious side to our story.

That story is why I'm writing this book. I want to tell you a little more about me and how I overcame my insecurities at school to become a master saddler, about my life in America and how I fell in love and married a man I barely knew. These stories need to be told as I believe it may help others.

I went to America with two suitcases, a box of tools and an open heart. The plan was to stay and work a while, have fun and have an adventure. I did all those things, but I remained in the States a lot longer than planned and weathered many more storms than I ever could have anticipated. Sometimes it felt like a constant battle against the elements living on our homestead farm on the eastern plains in Colorado. Often it got tempestuous between me and my husband too – passionate and destructive. Why did I stay? Why do people hurt the people they love? And how did I survive? What I can tell you now is that I did, and I hope my story shows that others can too.

You may wonder why I've called my book *The Sun Over the Mountains*. It's partly named for the beautiful sunrise and the sunsets over the Rocky Mountains that arrived like gifts each day. I don't have any photographs, but the image of those epic mountains silhouetted against clear blue skies stays vivid in my mind. Some days, there were wispy clouds hanging low, seemingly stained orange by the sun. Other times, the palette was yellow with delicious licks of gold. It was never the same but always incredible. So I'd turn to the sun over the mountains and get strength to carry on. If I was lonely or sad then that view was like a massive shot of optimism. The light reminded me of the beauty in the world and how blessed I was to have my horses and all the other animals on the farm. The sun over the mountains became my symbol of hope.

I still don't have all the answers but writing this book has been healing. Just getting my story out and going back through everything has made things clearer to me. Funnily enough, when I

was wavering about doing this book, it was Jay who convinced me it was a good idea. He told me it would be hard but cathartic. So far, so true. My soul is reviving, my inner strength is coming back, and I'm getting back to the person I was before I left to go to America. Most of all, I hope my story brings understanding to people going through all kinds of rubbish. Life isn't easy, but it's far better when there is empathy and compassion from those around us.

The sun over the mountains is there for everyone!