

*Theia Mey*



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# *Ohana*

*One Woman's Battle With  
Love, Death, & Destiny*

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Names, dates, locations, occupations, and other distinguishing details have been changed to protect the identity of the people in this book.

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## DEDICATION

*“Ohana” comes from the Hawaiian term for “family.”  
It includes extended family members and those chosen as  
family, none of whom are ever forgotten or left behind.*

*My children and I have used it as our mantra  
since they were very small.*

*~ Theia Mey*

To my family, whose never-ending love, understanding, and support bring comfort to my life. Especially to:

- \* My mother and role model. Everything I am I owe to her.
- \* My sister, who runs to my aid whenever I need her, no questions asked. I will forever be grateful.
- \* My children, whose unwavering love, loyalty, and support are my inspiration.

To a very special couple who lent me a helping hand at a very difficult time in my life.

To all the doctors and nurses who have treated me, and are still treating me, during my ongoing battle with cancer.

Always to God, who listens to my prayers, never fails or abandons me, and remains by my side as I continue on my life's journey.

And to my older daughter, who by her zeal and persistence compelled me to write this book.

*Happiness cannot be traveled to,  
owned, earned, worn, or consumed.*

*Happiness is the spiritual experience of living  
every minute with love, grace and gratitude.*

*~ Denis Waitley*

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## FOREWORD

Two years ago, my daughter said to me, “Mom, you have to write a book about your life.”

Surprised, I replied, “Why? Who would be interested in reading about my life?”

She responded, “You don’t realize that most people are not as strong as you are. I have watched you struggle, suffer, and survive cancer three consecutive times under extremely difficult circumstances, and yet here you are, alive and stronger than ever. I believe your story will bring awareness and inspiration to people around the world.”

I was diagnosed with breast cancer six years ago, which later metastasized to bone cancer. The month of October is dedicated to cancer awareness, and for the occasion, my daughter wrote me the following note:

I will never be able to thank you enough for all you have done for me, for all you have sacrificed, and for always putting me and my well-being first, no matter what.

You are the epitome of what every mother should aspire to be. I love you so much. Words cannot begin to describe what a special place you hold in my heart and in my life. I would be nothing without you: The world would be a dark and cold place without your uplifting spirit.

I can only hope that one day I will become a fraction of the incredible human being you are. You are my world!

\* \* \*

I am only human and far from perfect. I have made many mistakes throughout my life, suffered the consequences, and paid high prices for them all.

I stayed in relationships that took me to places within myself I did not even know existed.

I was confronted with alcoholism, drug addition, mental illness, self-destruction, rape, abuse, betrayal, and cancer.

And I lost my little girl when I was fighting to survive and needed her most in my life.

Life does not have to be complicated, yet when I wasn't able to manage myself I lost track of who I was and what purpose there was for me in life.

Truth defines our desires and physical dreams. Faith assures us of what we hope for and tells us what we cannot see. Love conquers all when it is given selflessly. Our minds are more powerful than our bodies and our greatest tools to fight and overcome life's adversities, struggles, and fears.

We have the ability to rise up and take control of our lives, if only we stop to pay attention to the warning signs that we so often find ourselves excusing and ignoring. The power to alter the course of our own destinies resides within each and every one of us. My life story is living testimony that the old saying, "Mind over matter" is true. My book's purpose is to inspire those who feel adrift in love and in life.

This is my story . . . . ❖

## THE BEGINNING

I was born and raised in Santa Ynez, a little village on the outskirts of Madrid.

Life in Santa Ynez goes back for many generations. My parents were also born and raised there, as were their parents and grandparents. My parents met when they were very young. They fell in love, got married, and remained married for 68 years – for better or for worse.

There used to be 700 to 800 people living in Santa Ynez at any given time. This number decreased as the years went by because people began migrating to Madrid. Now Santa Ynez has about 500 people, mostly widows and the elderly. Everyone there knows each other, which means everyone knows everyone else's business.

The village is so small that there is no need to drive anywhere. Walking across it takes 10 minutes at the most. The houses are made out of stone with thick walls. They are all adjacent to one another, forming one long block. It was safe living there when I was growing up. We did not have to lock the doors to cars or houses, and there was no real danger. There was only one bar in the village square, but other than that, there were no other places to go and nothing else to do. My friends and I would go walking two or three miles up and down the road and mountains. Other times we would be out in the street or inside our houses listening to music and playing.

I had a simple life: going to school and helping my mother with the chores. I was always busy learning something new: cooking, knitting, embroidering, sewing, and, of course, cleaning. My mother allowed me to play with my friends, but

she also felt that I needed to learn how to become a woman, so that one day when I got married I would be able to do everything a wife and a mother should know how to do.

Unlike my brother and sister, I was a rebel. My family is made up of conservative Catholics. I was taught to believe in God, go to church every Sunday, and to be the best I could be by adhering to morals, values, integrity, and understanding the difference between good and bad, right and wrong. I was shown love and affection, and as a result, I have always been very comfortable with my feelings and emotions.

Back when I was a young girl, finding a boyfriend, getting married, and starting a family with a man from the same village, or at least one nearby, was expected. I, however, always felt like an outsider. I did not belong in Santa Ynez. I always knew that getting married and living there for the rest of my life was not what I was meant for. I am a free-spirited individual, and living in such a little village made me feel caged in, like a bird unable to fly away.

I did enjoy going to school and learning. I applied myself as a student and always received good grades. My teachers felt that seventh grade was far too easy for me, so they decided to bump me up to the eighth grade. Therefore, I finished middle school at the age of 13.

Our village's school ended at middle school. So in order to continue my studies I would have had to relocate to Banderas, the nearest town, which was an hour away. My teachers advised my mother that I had great potential and should continue my studies. Going to high school was a vital step in the right direction.

My mother, with pain in her heart given my young age,

agreed that I should go and began making the arrangements. Needless to say, as the time grew closer for me to be on my way to high school, she became increasingly upset. She would go cry alone in order to shield us from the pain she was feeling from having to let me go.

I saw and felt her pain. She looked as if she had aged 10 years in three days. Seeing the sadness she had so much trouble concealing, and having watched her suffer all my life, I did not want her to suffer more on my account.

So I proposed the following compromise to her: “Mamá, I will make you a deal. If you buy me a motorcycle, I will stay instead of going to high school.” She agreed, and soon enough, I had my motorcycle and remained living in Santa Ynez, as I promised.

I began working at the age of 14. I worked five days a week, eight hours a day, and continued working until I reached the age of 18. When I was 16, I began attending night school in a nearby village. I attended my classes every evening, except this time I didn’t apply myself and did not do much studying. After a while, I would skip classes and go dancing at a nearby club instead. The only class I made sure to always attend was English.

My childhood was not perfect but it was nice (I don’t believe there is such a thing as perfection. We are only human, and therefore, far from perfect.) My mother is an amazing woman and mother. Everything that I am, everything I have endured, and everything that I have survived in life, I owe to her. I am who I am because of her.

When I was growing up, she was constantly giving me advice. Each time she would start I would think to myself,

*There she goes again!* At the time I thought her words were going in one ear and out the other, but later in life I learned that I had actually heard her.

It was not until years later that I realized the impact her words really had on me. They would end up being the foundation on which I stood, keeping me whole, intact, and ultimately stronger at times when it would have been so easy to give up.

I have survived. I am alive today and I owe it all to my mother. She is my angel. The advice she gave me continued to play over and over in my head throughout the years, especially when I felt lost and broken and found myself in what appeared to be the end of a long, dark road with no way out. I heard her speaking to me with love, understanding, and with my best interests at heart. I felt her presence and endless love for me, and found the courage to choose right from wrong and good from bad, keeping my integrity and faith intact, remembering my roots, and believing, in spite of how badly I may have been treated by others, that what you give you get back. And so I chose to walk away rather than to engage in revenge.

\* \* \*

Our family was no different than any other typical family with its positive aspects and failings.

My father was a farmer and worked the land he inherited that had been passed on from generation to generation. His mother died when he was two years old and he was raised by his single-parent father.

My father fulfilled his role as a provider and had a good

heart overall, but he had a bad temper and the way in which he treated my mother was cruel. During my childhood, my father criticized my mother as far back as I can remember.

Granted, he left to work the land many times before daylight and came back at night, but that should not have been a cause or excuse for him to shout at or insult my mother just because she had not set out his socks along with the rest of his clothes after he took a shower. Or because there was a fork, spoon, or glass missing when it was time for him to sit down at the table.

She was his servant, and watching her cry more often than not was very painful for me.

My father never had much to say to his children – my brother, sister, or me – and I don't recall him showing us any real affection. I was never close to him.

My mother, on the other hand, was completely the opposite. She always gave of herself, always protecting and taking care of us, and never asking for anything in return. We were, and continue to be, her world. She constantly worked hard to keep us all happy and well cared for, asking for nothing in return except for us to be the best we could be every single day.

Every time we did something wrong, she would protect us by hiding it from my father so he wouldn't get mad and yell at us. His anger was something all of us wanted to avoid!

Sometimes when I couldn't take it any more, I would leave and go to the house where my mother had grown up. Her sister had inherited it when my grandparents passed away, and it was empty because my aunt and her family lived in the city.

My aunt's house was very big and built out of stone with

very thick walls. There was no need for air conditioning in the summer, and in the winter it was very cold inside. I would take the spare set of keys my mother kept, go there by myself, and wait for a few hours before going back home in the hope that things had quieted down.

Other times I would go to church to pray. The church was beautiful. It was built in the 14th century and was quite exceptional looking. I found comfort just sitting there, praying to God for my mother to stop suffering. The church still holds a very special place in my heart today.

I asked my mother to leave my father, but she replied, “Where am I going to go? I got married for better or for worse.” She stayed by his side and silently suffered to the very end of his life.

\* \* \*

My brother and sister were very much alike in that they did what was expected of them. They met their respective girlfriend and boyfriend, became engaged, bought a house, got married, and had children. I did the complete opposite. In fact, I went backward! And just when everyone thought there wouldn't be any more surprises from me, there were!

The pity of it all was that most of the surprises were rarely good. I was a rebel at heart going back as far as I can remember: If everyone went to the right, I refused to follow and off I went in the opposite direction.

Every time I did not follow the rules as expected, which was rather frequently, my mother would ask me, “What are the people in the village going to think about you?”

My response? “Well, do any of them sleep in this house? Do they pay our bills? Are they in any way, shape, or form a part of our lives? The answer is no, so who cares what they say or what they think!”

One way in which I consistently slipped out of the bounds my mother set for me was staying out late.

I’ve always loved music and enjoyed dancing. Beginning at the age of 14, I went dancing on the weekends with my friends in surrounding villages. But I would always come home two or three hours past my given curfew. My mother would stay up waiting for me into the early morning hours. I dreaded opening the front door because I knew what I had coming and it was never good. However, I continued to break the rules anyway.

\* \* \*

Santa Ynez, like every other village in Spain, held what we called “fiestas” once a year, which included the running of bulls in the streets. These parties lasted for seven days. I really enjoyed the fiestas. I still do, and go home for them as often as I can.

On the first day of the fiesta we had what we called “Toro de Polvora.” This involved a man-made bull that one of the village men carried, with fireworks shooting up everywhere as he chased people around the village square.

On the second day we would go to church in the morning, and in the evening several music groups would set up on a platform to perform and everyone would dance in the square: children, teenagers, married couples, and even the elderly.

But the day I liked the most was the evening prior to

when the villagers held the running of the bulls and the bullfights. My friends and I would stay awake all night waiting for the bulls to be brought in, which was always in the very early hours of the morning.

Handlers would bring in bulls and cows together, and shortly thereafter they would let a cow out into the ring for the people in the village to come out and run with it – or better yet, run away from it! A few hours later, they would have the running of the bulls in the streets, and on only one day, a bull would be let out in the field.

Letting a bull out in the field was dangerous because sometimes the bull would head toward the village instead of the open field. On one occasion, my mother was at home and when she went to open the front door, right there in front of her very eyes was a bull staring directly at her. Needless to say, she shut the door immediately, her heart about to jump right out of her chest.

Otherwise, if all went well and the bull remained in the field, people from our village and other villages nearby would come to join in the festivities. They came in on motorcycles, scooters, horses, trucks, cars, vans, and tractors. Many people even came on foot. They would line up circling around the truck, waiting for the sliding door to go up and the bull come down the ramp running furiously toward them. Then they would follow the bull up and down the mountains, sometimes having very close encounters with it.

Many times these encounters were a bit too close for comfort. I am not a bull expert by any means, but I've always heard that once a bull is out and around people, it learns too much and can't be returned to the livestock farm.

The village men would place iron bars along the streets, which allowed us to be in close proximity with the bull while still being as safe as possible. We had to be very careful, because sometimes the bulls would hit the iron bars trying to get to the people standing behind them, and in doing so they might manage to stick in one horn between the bars. Once a horn was in, chances were the other one would go in also, and once the head of a bull is in, the body will follow.

I did not enjoy the bullfights and the pain and suffering the bulls were doomed to endure from the beginning until their death.

Young boys aspiring to become bullfighters would be hired as “matadors” to go to the villages. Given that they were learning, often it would take them many attempts before they were able to kill a bull. It was very hard for me to watch because I love bulls. They are brave, strong, and beautiful.

I would often climb up the small building the bulls were kept in and remain there, frozen, looking at them through the bars, straight into their eyes with an immense feeling of respect, admiration, and fear.

Having grown up watching bullfights, I have witnessed that no matter what they do to a bull, or how much physical pain they are subjected to, the bull will remain standing and only collapse when taking its last breath. In many ways, I have compared my life to the life of a bull.

Each time I go home, my sister takes me to see them in the livestock farms. I stand behind the fence just looking at them, admiring them, fearing them, and enjoying the moment as my sister patiently waits for me. On the other side of the fence, they stare right back at me, letting me know that as long

as I mind my business and do not invade their space, they will do the same.

On these visits I cherish the time I spend with my family, and given that I am not able to visit frequently, whenever I am with them I make it a point to make every moment count and not waste even one.

\* \* \*

One day when I was 13 years old, my mother was in the kitchen washing dishes and I said to her, “Mamá, I am not going to have a boyfriend or get married in Santa Ynez. When I turn 18, I will go to England and learn English.”

To which she replied, “You’re talking crazy, Theia, who knows what can happen between now and then? The next thing you are going to tell me is that you want a horse. Stop talking nonsense and go upstairs and clean your room!”

When I was 15, I expressed my intentions to my supervisor at work as well, and he stated, “You will do just like every other girl in the village does. You will get married, have children, and live here happily ever after.”

I quit my job two weeks prior to my 18th birthday and left the village three days later. A few days before my departure, my supervisor approached me to tell me, “I have to apologize for not giving you the credit that you deserved when you told me you wouldn’t stay in the village. I did not believe you then, but you have proven me wrong. I wish you all the best that life has to offer you.” He has since passed away (may he rest in peace).

My father was diagnosed with dementia four years ago. A

year later, I went home to visit my family. My father still remembered me, although at times his mind was absent – in another world, his new world.

For the first time, he was affectionate with me. I had the opportunity to kiss and hug him often. He told me frequently that he loved me, and in return I told him that I loved him also very much. I was happy to observe how much he had changed, and how kind and loving he was to my mother.

This is the last memory I have of him and one that keeps playing on and on in my mind, for I would never see him again. He passed away two years ago, dying peacefully when he went to sleep one night with my mother (his partner of 68 years) by his side, surrounded by her never-ending and comforting love.

That night she said goodnight to him one more time, for the last time. And I am blessed knowing that my last memory of him is hearing him say to me, “I love you.” ❖

### DEFIANCE

The first adventure in my journey began when I left Santa Ynez to live in Madrid with my mother's sister.

My intentions were to go to England to learn English, just as I had planned while growing up. Given that I didn't have any money, I worked in a factory making handbags while I attended evening English classes.

Three months later, a friend I knew from one of the nearby villages told me that he was driving to England and I could go with him. I did not tell my mother that I was going, but did tell my aunt and asked her to keep my secret.

Once in London, I called my mother. When I told her where I was, she said, "I am glad to know that you are safe, but had you asked me if you could go, I would have said no."

I stayed in England for a few days while I looked for a job. Once I found one, I flew back home to gather my things and say goodbye to my family.

Spain was not a part of the common market, so the only way I could work in England was as an *au pair*. According to the agency, and my own understanding, I was going back to England to live with a family and take care of their children during the day. During the evenings I would attend school.

I was picked up at the airport by a man from the agency and driven to the home where I was to work. Much to my surprise, there were adults but no children in the house. The three months of English classes I had taken in Madrid did not do much for me, as I was unable to understand a word the driver or the family was saying to me.

The very next morning, I called the agency to inquire

about my new situation. I was advised that I would be working as a maid at that house from then on.

My room was very small, almost like a closet. The only time the family addressed me was to give me orders. I would wake up very early each morning to make breakfast for them and set the table. I was never included or asked to join them for breakfast, lunch, or dinner. I always ate by myself, and the majority of my day was spent cleaning the house.

A week after I took this position, I called a Spanish girl who was the same age as I was. I had met her while looking for a job on my first trip to England. She was living with her mother, a single parent also from Spain. They came to pick me up and I went to stay at their house while I searched for another position. I simply could not take working as a maid in those people's house any longer.

The next morning I called the agency again. They were able to find a job for me working at a fast food restaurant. Given that the only job I could legally have in England was as an *au pair*, working this new job was illegal.

I would again be working six days a week, 12 hours a day, for low wages. In exchange I was again given a small room.

I remember at one time I was very sick with a high fever. I had fallen into a deep sleep, and when I woke up, four days had gone by. I called my mother, crying.

"We will send you the money to fly back home," she said. "Just come back."

To this I replied, "I cannot come back until I learn English."

The restaurant was a long and rectangular structure. My

room was adjacent to it, and in the back, there was a small trailer where the landlord would stay when he came to visit from time to time. Surrounding the trailer and behind the restaurant, there was a closed-in fence where the owner kept a large dog for security purposes.

One day when I opened the back door, the dog attacked me, sinking its teeth into my arm. It only let go when I started screaming. The owner came running out and pulled the dog off me. I was taken to the hospital and given a tetanus shot.

I was working very hard, and too many hours, but I knew that it was as good as it was going to get for me. I did not speak English yet, and until I learned to how to communicate with the customers, my job was to clear tables, do dishes, and clean the restaurant overall.

I began going to school to take English classes at night, and would wait for the bus in very cold temperatures each day for approximately two weeks. Finally, I decided that I would have to learn the language on my own, and I did. Six months into my stay in England, I understood enough English to graduate into working as a cashier.

The restaurant where I was working was located between two small towns. It was approximately two miles from both of them. I was very naïve and inexperienced, and on one of my days off from work, I was in the restaurant talking to one of the customers, telling him that I was on my way to the next town to catch the train. He offered to give me a ride and I accepted.

On the way to town, he deviated from the road and drove to a deserted beach, intending to rape me. I don't know how, but I realized what he intended to do, and I broke loose. I took off running as fast as I could and never looked back. I would

never again get into a car with a stranger.

One day, the owner of the restaurant announced that he was opening another restaurant and I was to be transferred to work there. Ironically, the managers of this restaurant, a married couple, were originally from Spain and treated me terribly. I continued to work six days a week, 12 hours a day, and was treated as if I were a slave.

During my time at this restaurant, I met a young man I really liked. He was an English boy and a cook. I ended up staying with him while I thought of what to do next. I took off from work and disappeared for three days.

I did not call the managers where I had been working. Given that the agency had sent me to them it was their responsibility to look after my safety. When I didn't show up for work they were worried that something may have happened to me – not because they cared about me, but because they were afraid of what may happen to them if I didn't turn up.

Three days later, when I returned, I told them, “The rules have changed. I will not be treated as a slave, but as a human being and should this not be the case, I will call the owner and tell him everything that you have done. I will explain to him the ways in which you have treated me. I will also tell him that I do everything around here while you do nothing and order me around.”

They eased up on me a little and I continued to work there a while longer, but eventually moved on and found a job at an Italian restaurant and rented a small room nearby.

I only had one day off a week and would usually spend it with the English boy. I had my first sexual experience with him, and we would remain together during my stay in England.

\* \* \*

I had lived in England for a year and a half when I decided to go back home to visit my family. On my way back, I was stopped at the airport by immigration and questioned.

After interrogating me for five hours, they found out that I had been working in England illegally. I was told that I was being deported and given 24 hours to collect my belongings and return to immigration. When I returned to immigration for my impending return back home, I was held for a day in a room with many other people from all over the world. That night I was ordered to sleep on a bed as hard as a rock. The bright lights remained on all night long.

I was awakened very early the next morning, searched, and taken to a helicopter to be flown to the airport. Once I was on the plane, I was handed my passport and deported back to Spain.

In Madrid, I went back to the academy where I had previously taken classes before relocating to England. Here I met with the director and was offered a job teaching English there.

A few weeks later, the director spoke to me about teaching English to 12th graders at a high school. Apparently, the teacher was older, and the students failed to apply themselves, playing around in the classroom as the teacher attempted to keep the class together.

A few days before Christmas vacation, I met with the principal of the high school. She advised me that she had heard very good things about me and wanted me to give it a try. She gave me the handbook to look over during Christmas vacation.

I was hesitant, realizing that this was a major challenge for me. After all, I wasn't even 20 years old yet and these kids were close to being 18 years old. I looked over the book and decided that it was a challenge I was willing to take, and I did.

On the first day of the second semester, following Christmas vacation, I began teaching English grammar at the high school. I introduced myself, set the ground rules for the class, told them what type of behavior would or wouldn't be tolerated in the classroom, and what consequences there would be if the rules weren't followed.

Surprisingly enough the class, consisting of approximately 34 students, behaved. With the exception of two students who were a bit of trouble, everyone followed the rules as I had set them out on the first day of class. Outside of the classroom, I was one of them and socialized with some of them. However, in the classroom, I was the teacher. They understood this and abided by my rules and respected me. As the school year came to an end, I successfully completed the grading period. The director congratulated me for a job well done.

When my work at the school was finished, rather than go back to work at the academy and continue teaching English, I decided to go back to England for the mere purpose of making a point. Although I had been deported and was restricted from entering the country again, I was going to prove that I could go back, work illegally again, and then leave whenever I chose.

I began making the arrangements. I tore my passport to pieces, putting it in the trash (it had a stamp in it indicating that I had been deported) and got a new passport. Given that I had been deported from both airports in London, I knew the best

way for me to get back into England was to go by boat. I took a train to northern Spain and from there boarded a boat to Portsmouth.

Upon my arrival in England, I told immigration what they wanted to hear instead of the truth. If I had told them that my intention was to stay in the country for six months, they would have questioned me and probably given me two weeks. Instead I told them that I was there on vacation for two weeks. They stamped my passport, allowing me to remain in the country for six months.

Once in London, I called my Spanish friend and stayed with her and her mother until I found a job and a place of my own. This time around, I spoke English and found a job at a nice restaurant working as a waitress and earning a decent salary.

Even though my previous employers had taken advantage of and exploited me for a year and a half, this time around it would be different.

And once I had proven my point, I'd go back home and never again return to England. ❖