

How I lost
half my body
weight and
found a new
way of life

'Simone's story is
truly incredible. What
she's achieved is such
an inspiration!'

MATILDA RICE

JOURNEY TO HEALTH

SIMONE ANDERSON

**JOURNEY TO
HEALTH**

How I lost
half my body
weight and
found a new
way of life

JOURNEY TO HEALTH

SIMONE ANDERSON

with Sarah Ell


ALLEN & UNWIN
SYDNEY • MELBOURNE • AUCKLAND • LONDON

First published in 2018

Copyright © Simone Anderson Pretscherer, 2018

All images are from Simone's collection, unless otherwise specified.

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording or by any information storage and retrieval system, without prior permission in writing from the publisher.

Allen & Unwin
Level 3, 228 Queen Street
Auckland 1010, New Zealand
Phone: (64 9) 377 3800
Email: info@allenandunwin.com
Web: www.allenandunwin.co.nz

83 Alexander Street
Crows Nest NSW 2065, Australia
Phone: (61 2) 8425 0100

A catalogue record for this book is available from the National Library of New Zealand.

ISBN 978 1 760633 54 7
eISBN 978 1 76063 631 9

Design by Kate Barraclough
Cover photograph by Jonny Scott

To my family, friends and partner, and to every single
one of you who supported me to get to this point

CONTENTS

PROLOGUE

CHAPTER 1: **THE SKINNY KID**

CHAPTER 2: **BAD HABITS**

CHAPTER 3: **FINDING A PATH**

CHAPTER 4: **GOING DOWNHILL**

CHAPTER 5: **THE TURNING POINT**

CHAPTER 6: **STARTING ON THE JOURNEY**

CHAPTER 7: **GETTING MOVING**

CHAPTER 8: **THE BATTLE WITH FOOD**

CHAPTER 9: **NEW CHALLENGES**

CHAPTER 10: **DECIDING ON SURGERY**

CHAPTER 11: **UNDER THE KNIFE**

CHAPTER 12: MY NEW STOMACH

CHAPTER 13: CHANGES

CHAPTER 14: OCEAN SWIMMER

CHAPTER 15: HAPPY BIRTHDAY TO ME!

CHAPTER 16: ALWAYS MOVING

CHAPTER 17: KEEPING IT REAL

CHAPTER 18: CELEBRATING THE LITTLE VICTORIES

CHAPTER 19: ME TOO

CHAPTER 20: TOO MUCH SKIN

CHAPTER 21: GOAL WEIGHT!

CHAPTER 22: INSTA-FAMOUS

CHAPTER 23: THE CALL THAT CHANGED MY LIFE—AGAIN

CHAPTER 24: BECOMING A VLOGGER

CHAPTER 25: SCOTTSDALE, AZ

CHAPTER 26: I'M ALIVE!

CHAPTER 27: THE ROAD TO RECOVERY

CHAPTER 28: HEADING TO LA

CHAPTER 29: LIVING THE *FABLIFE*

CHAPTER 30: HOME AT LAST

CHAPTER 31: GETTING BACK INTO IT

CHAPTER 32: SOULMATE

CHAPTER 33: JOURNEYTOHEALTH.CO.NZ

CHAPTER 34: MAKING IT MY CAREER

CHAPTER 35: THE FINAL CUT

CHAPTER 36: LOOKING BACK ON THE JOURNEY

PROLOGUE

THE DAY I DECIDED TO change my life started out pretty much like any other day. I crawled out of bed feeling tired, despite the fact I'd just woken up, and got ready for my day interning at a jewellery factory with my friend Chantelle. I'd been working there for just a few weeks and was really enjoying it.

As usual, I didn't have time to make breakfast, so I followed my typical routine of stopping by the bakery on the way to work and grabbing myself a pie and a doughnut. Once at my desk I'd scoff them as quick as I could, feeling bad because Chantelle was such a healthy eater. Then, as I got underway with my work, my thoughts would turn to what I was going to have for lunch. I was 23 years old, and I was seriously overweight, almost completely inactive and obsessed with food.

There was one thing different about this day, however. Nagging away in the back of my mind was the knowledge that a big set of industrial scales from the factory warehouse was going to be sold today. They were used to weigh freight and materials, but I knew one other thing they could be used for: me.

It had been months since I'd last weighed myself and it was obvious to me that using commercial scales was the only option. Most home scales only go up to 100 kg, and I could tell I was way over that. The last time I'd had the

opportunity to check my weight I had been about 150 kg, and I had got heavier since.

This, then, was my only opportunity—and time was running out. It was now or never if I wanted to face the reality of what my weight had crept up to.

When lunchtime rolled around, the others headed off to the lunchroom while I made an excuse about finishing something at my desk. I was terrified that someone would see me going down to the warehouse and ask me what I was up to. I was even more terrified of being caught on the scales and revealing my weight in the process. But, funnily enough, I wasn't terrified of what the scales were going to say.

I'm not stupid—I knew I was overweight. I had been steadily gaining kilos for the previous 10 years. But, strange as it may seem, I wasn't *that* worried about my weight; I'd come to accept it as a part of my life. I'd learned to live with it, to adapt the things I did so that I didn't get caught out having to walk any distance or sit on something that wouldn't hold my weight, and I bought clothes that disguised my rolls of fat. I was just curious, that's all. I was resigned to the fact that I was going to be heavier; it was just a question of how much.

I finally worked up the courage—and the energy, because physically it was a bit of an effort—to go downstairs and turn on the scales. I cast a glance around; no one was watching. Then I slipped off my shoes and stepped on.

The scales were those old-school ones with a dial and a needle. As the platform registered my weight, the needle bounced around then settled down to return its verdict.

169 kg.

Oh. My. God.

It was worse than I thought.

This had gone beyond a joke. I weighed the equivalent of nearly three healthy women my height. I was what doctors would call morbidly obese—and by that they mean 'so fat that it's going to kill you'. I knew I had an increased risk of developing diabetes, high blood pressure, sleep apnoea, gastroesophageal reflux, gallstones, osteoarthritis, heart disease and the big one: cancer.

I stepped off the scales, watched the needle flicker back to nothingness, and thought about how hard it was going to be climbing back up the stairs.

Something had to change.

CHAPTER 1

THE SKINNY KID

I WASN'T ALWAYS OVERWEIGHT—far from it. In fact, when I was a kid I was pretty skinny, in that natural way most kids are before they have a chance to develop bad eating habits. Like a lot of children of my era, I was super-active, always running everywhere, jumping, climbing, and into every sport going. I could never have imagined when I finished primary school that within 10 years I'd be so fat I could hardly walk, let alone run.

I was born in Auckland, and brought up in Remuera. I had an older half-brother and half-sister from my dad's first marriage, who lived with their mum, and then two younger brothers came along: Nicklaus, who is two years younger than me, and Jackson, who is another 18 months younger again. Mum and Dad divorced when I was 13, and the boys and I moved to live with Mum in Parnell, closer to the city centre, while spending regular weekends with Dad.

I did all my schooling, right from primary up to Year 13, at St Cuthbert's College, a girls' school in Epsom. I feel quite privileged to have gone to one school right through, as it meant I knew everyone and felt really at home there. It gave me a strong base and the confidence to do well in a supportive, familiar environment.

As I said, I was a really active kid. As soon as any sport was offered at school, I had my hand up to give it a try. I think at one stage I was doing 14 different sports. I loved being busy before and after school with training and

events (though I'm not sure Mum enjoyed it so much, having to drive me around!). Netball, water polo, badminton, table tennis, hockey, cricket, basketball—anything that wasn't running-based. I never liked cross-country or long-distance running (and I still don't).

As soon as any sport was offered at school, I had my hand up to give it a try. I think at one stage I was doing 14 different sports.

My greatest passion was swimming, probably because as soon as I tried it I discovered I was better than everyone else! I seemed to have a natural ability, making it easy for me to get motivated to train and compete because I got the buzz of winning right from the start. I competed in pretty much every stroke and distance, including medleys and relays, but butterfly was probably my best discipline—I won a national age-group title in that.



Cuddles with my beloved mum, Nikki, and my younger brothers, Niklaus (left) and Jackson.



As a kid I was into just about every sport going, including tennis.

Mum had been an athletics champion and she had great hopes for me in track and field, but she remembers the first time she came along to watch me compete at school athletics: I tried the long jump and had trouble even making it into the pit. That was the end of that dream. But then at my first school swimming sports I basically won everything, so that made up for it.

By the time I was nine, up until the age of around 12, I was totally into my swimming. I was training morning and evening, plus Saturdays and Sundays. I did most of my training out at Sacred Heart College in Glendowie, which was quite a drive away, so that meant some very early mornings for Mum and Dad, but they were amazing and they never complained. I was competing at regional and national levels, as well as lots of club meets and other qualifying events.

By the time I was nine, up until the age of around 12, I was totally into my swimming. I was training morning and evening, plus Saturdays and Sundays.

At this stage I saw swimming as my future: I was miles ahead of everyone else without really having to try, so it was both easy and fun for me. But the older I got, the less and less interested I became in devoting so much of my time to training. On a Friday night my friends would be off being social and

I'd be at the pool, doing laps. By the time I was forced to give swimming up, I was almost ready for it. I was sick of how much of my life it was taking up and I wanted a break.

However, as it turned out, the break I got wasn't the kind of thing I'd had in mind.

MY MUM'S FATHER IS AUSTRIAN—hence her surname, Pretscherer, which I use on legal documents—and he is a super-keen skier. He and his brother came out from Austria together, and skiing was in their heritage. My great-uncle became the first head ski instructor on Mt Ruapehu. My grandparents are life members of the Ngauruhoe Ski Club, which has lodges on both the Whakapapa and Turoa ski fields, and when I was a kid we would go down there every winter. I was skiing before I could walk, being held up between Grandad's legs.

By the time I was 11 or 12, I was a very confident skier. Having grown up on the slopes, I had no fear and just wanted to go as fast as possible, racing my brothers down the mountain. Grandad had taken us on the black (advanced) runs from about the age of five, so nothing daunted us.

On one particular holiday, when I was 13, we were up Whakapapa on a beautiful morning, getting ready for the first run of the day. Grandad told us he was going off to do a particular run, and suggested that Nicklaus and I choose a different one then meet him at the bottom.

We had to take a T-bar up to the top of the run, and Nicklaus kept falling off. He just couldn't seem to stay on the lift with me, and I got impatient with him. *Who cares*, I thought, *I'll just go up by myself and he can find his own way back down.*



Posing with my St Cuthbert's swim team after winning an inter-school competition. I'm in the centre, holding the trophy.



On the slopes with Jackson (left) and Niklaus.

Halfway up I started feeling guilty—he was only 11 and I knew I shouldn't have left him on the mountain by himself. My heart was racing as I rode the rest of the way to the top. *I just need to get down as fast as possible and find him, I thought. Then we'll find Grandad and everything will be all right.*

The run started out okay, but when I was part way down I came over a

slight rise and found myself on a huge crust of ice. I had no grip with my skis and I started sliding out of control. Then: *bam!* I fell down onto my left side on the unforgiving ice. I could feel the bones in my arm shatter as it absorbed the full force of my fall.

What happened next is a bit of a blur. Someone found me and I was put into a ‘banana boat’ (rescue toboggan) and taken to the bottom of the ski field. The whole time I was freaking out about where Nicklaus was, and whether he’d been able to reach Granddad or was roaming around the mountain by himself. I just had to hope that they would find one another (which they eventually did).

The medics tried to call Grandma, but when they couldn’t get hold of her I was helicoptered on my own to Waikato Hospital. Mum rushed down from Auckland to my bedside, but poor Grandma had to hitch-hike to the hospital because Granddad was still up the mountain with the car keys!

I’d never broken a bone before, so I didn’t know if the level of pain I was experiencing was out of the ordinary, but I had a feeling that this was a pretty nasty fracture. I had friends who’d broken an arm and been back at school the next day, so it hadn’t seemed like a big deal for them, but for me the pain was so bad I could hardly sleep for several days. Mum had to put me in front of the TV in her room and dose me up on painkillers just to get me through the day. Several of the breaks were near the top of my upper humerus, so my arm had been very difficult to cast. The doctors were unable to cast over my shoulder, which meant I couldn’t rely fully on the cast to keep the bones in the right place; I had to constantly hold my arm in a certain position to allow the breaks to heal. The massive cast they did put on me—which went right down to my fingers—was immobilising, and made doing anything and everything difficult.

I had the cast on for six months, which seems like a lifetime when you’re 13. Fortunately I never had to have my arm operated on, but the doctors reset it a few times, taking the cast on and off. I still have a few odd lumps and bumps on that arm where it didn’t heal quite right.

The only good thing to come out of the situation was that I managed to milk enough parental sympathy to score myself a pet rabbit and a lava lamp—two things I’d wanted for a long time and had always been denied! Once Bugs Bunny had joined the family, I was happy enough to take a break from swimming and all my other activities, and to enjoy the novelty of being lazy. But that was when everything started to change—and not for the better.

CHAPTER 2

BAD HABITS

I DIDN'T PUT ON A whole lot of weight straight away. It just crept up on me. Slowly but surely, the balance of energy going in (what I ate) versus energy out (the amount of exercise I did) got out of whack, and I started gaining weight.

It wasn't that I ate badly. Mum was always very, very strict and wouldn't let us eat anything processed, so everything we had in our lunchboxes was natural, healthy and made from whole ingredients. There were no bought biscuits or food out of a packet—everything was homemade. At the time I thought she was the meanest mother in the world, especially when my friends all had store-bought treats in their lunchboxes. They always wanted to swap their goodies for my beautiful home-made slice, which I was more than happy to do—I didn't know what all the fuss was about when it came to home-made baking. From my perspective, it felt like we were never allowed to have 'nice' foods.

Obviously my mum had the best intentions, and it came from the best possible place, but unfortunately it had the effect on me of glorifying junk food. Whenever I could get my hands on it, I would go nuts. If I went to a friend's birthday party, I would gorge myself on all the foods I wasn't allowed to have at home to the point where I could hardly move when I got back; sometimes I would even vomit. I would go to town on things like lollies, chocolates and fairy bread, which were never seen in our house

(except on very special occasions).

I used to be sneaky at school, too, swapping lunches with my friends. Mum would check if I had eaten my (healthy) lunch each day, and it would all be gone, but I hadn't eaten it! I would have switched it with one or another of my friends' lunches. As the saying goes, you always want what you can't have: they wanted mine and I wanted theirs.

Despite this, my overall diet was very healthy. It was just that once I stopped doing so much exercise, my body couldn't keep up with the amount of food I ate. I had always been a big eater—I had two younger brothers who were *huge* eaters—and I was used to eating as much as I wanted. When I was really active I was able to keep my weight healthy and steady, but once I exchanged my super-busy life for one spent mostly on the couch, it couldn't last. My body couldn't possibly keep up, but I just didn't realise it at that stage.

BY THE TIME MY CAST came off, I hadn't put on a huge amount of weight but it was definitely trending upwards. And I was aware of it. I remember little comments Mum would make that weren't meant to be critical or unhelpful, but they did make me feel bad. She knew how inactive I'd become, so if we were out for dinner or eating at a friend's place she would tell me to serve myself less, put food back or stop at one helping because I 'didn't need any more'. Looking back, she was clearly aware of what was going on and was trying to get me back on track and stop me falling into bad habits, but I didn't see it that way. I would come out dressed in a new top, saying, 'Look, it hides my tummy,' and she'd say something like, 'Would it be better if you got rid of the tummy?' I remember feeling so embarrassed; I thought I looked nice and I felt hurt that she wasn't being supportive. I understand now that she was just trying to help—it must have been hard for her to see me going down that path, and there's no good way to tell someone you love that they need to lose weight.



A trophy I won while representing Parnell Swim Club, before I was forced to take a break from swimming. I'm about 12 years old here.

I went back to swimming for a while in a club team and did a couple of competitions, but things had changed: all the girls I used to be able to beat easily were now flying ahead of me.

I went back to swimming for a while in a club team and did a couple of competitions, but things had changed: all the girls I used to be able to beat easily were now flying ahead of me. I found this devastating, and quickly lost all interest in swimming. A lot of my passion for it had come from the fact that I was always winning, so once that was gone I couldn't see the point. I was going to have to work really hard to get back to where I had been, but I just couldn't find the motivation. I knew how much of my life it was going to take up, and I'd got used to taking it easy.

I didn't give up water sports entirely, though. The school team was looking for water polo players, and they asked if I wanted to give it a try. I did a

couple of sessions and took to it right away, so that became my new sport and passion, right through high school.

Water polo was the one sport I kept playing, even as my weight started to climb. But it wasn't the most practical sport for a self-conscious, overweight teenage girl: you're in togs all the time and you can't hide anything. I remember getting to the largest size available in the uniform togs and then having trouble fitting into them. I used to break the zip all the time trying to do them up. You weren't allowed to play if your zip was undone, but it got to the point where I physically couldn't do it up, so I had to say it was broken even when it wasn't, or else I'd put another top on underneath to try to hide it.

EACH YEAR DURING MY TEENAGE years I put on 10 or 15 kg, which is quite a lot when you think about it—about a kilo a month. I'm sure the people around me could see it, but for me it was so gradual I barely noticed. It wasn't as if one day I was thin and the next I was huge; just slowly but surely, I went from being a bit overweight to being seriously obese.

By the end of high school I was somewhere between 120 and 130 kg, so for a 17-year-old, let's be honest, I was huge. And it started to affect the things I wanted to do. I remember travelling to Rotorua on a school geography trip and the whole class was going to have a go at Zorbing, where you hop inside a big clear plastic ball and roll downhill. You had to weigh in and have your weight written on your hand, so the staff could work out who was going in which ball. I didn't realise it at first but I was over the weight limit, so I was told, 'You can't do it.'

The staff member said it quietly and none of my friends overheard, so I just pretended I was feeling sick and didn't want to have a go. But the reality was that I couldn't take part because of my weight. I felt so embarrassed and so pathetic that at my age I wasn't able to do something 'normal' kids could do.

I became a very sneaky eater. There was never anything in the house that I considered 'nice' or a 'treat', so I would buy the food I wanted for myself and hide it, then eat it when I was alone in my room.

Over that same period, my eating habits grew worse and worse. From the age of about 14 I started babysitting other people's kids, after school and at weekends. Having a part-time job meant money in my pocket, so whenever I came home from school by myself on the bus, I'd stop off at the dairy and spend my earnings on lollies. I'd hide them in the bottom of my school bag and snack on them over the course of the evening.

I became a very sneaky eater. There was never anything in the house that I considered 'nice' or a 'treat', so I would buy the food I wanted for myself and hide it, then eat it when I was alone in my room. I even used to take the wrappers back to school to dispose of them, so Mum wouldn't find them in the bin and tell me off. I knew Mum was watching me, so after eating my dinner, I would come back to the fridge later when no one was looking and steal more food.

It's hard to explain, but while I knew I was gaining weight, I didn't see it as a problem that needed to be solved. I still felt good about myself, I liked how I looked, and I was still able to do most of the things I wanted—it seemed as if it didn't really affect me. In the back of my mind I knew there was something wrong with my eating, because I felt I had to hide it from everyone. But I got pretty good at lying to myself.

CHAPTER 3

FINDING A PATH

RIGHT THROUGH SCHOOL, ALL I'D ever wanted to be was an investment banker—I know, pretty different from the way things turned out, right? I had a couple of friends whose fathers were investment bankers and I saw their lifestyles and thought, *That looks like a bit of me*. I figured that if I could be as successful as they were then I would be happy. So I studied economics through to Year 13, then went to the University of Auckland to do a business degree.

But I hated university, which was a big surprise for me and my family. I had always loved school and thrived there, but for some reason I just didn't enjoy uni at all. Maybe it was because I had so much going on—at the time I was coaching a couple of school water polo teams, nannying as much as I could and trying to study as well. My schedule was so full that I was getting only four hours' sleep a night, and I couldn't keep up that pace.

Another thing was that I really struggled to make friends—which was also new to me. I wasn't used to walking into a massive lecture hall filled with hundreds of strangers, just hoping that the one person I sat beside would be friendly. There was no real collegial environment at all—none of the students I met were living on campus and everyone would just head off to their suburban homes at night. I had a couple of school friends who were at Auckland Uni, too, so I hung out with them when I could, but I had virtually no social life.

I was really, really miserable. I'm usually a super-happy, bubbly, positive person, but at this point in my life I was feeling low all the time.

I remember coming home one night and sitting down with Mum to talk about it. I'd just failed a paper—the first time I'd ever failed anything in my life—and I wanted to quit. Mum was really good about it, and asked me what else I'd rather be doing. I'd always had a flair for hair and makeup—I watched YouTube videos for hours and practised on anyone who would let me. Mum suggested I follow that passion instead.

'But I've never studied it. I don't have any qualifications,' I moaned.

'Sometimes you don't need them,' she replied sensibly.

We had a look into the courses that were available, but they all seemed expensive and I couldn't get a student loan to do them. So instead of that, I set up my own Facebook page and started sharing my work, while living off my income from nannying. I picked up followers through Facebook and started to get clients booking in for hair and makeup. It took off slowly from there, and grew to the point where it's now a full-time job for me. I'm so glad that I have a mother who didn't try to force me to keep doing something I didn't love, and redirected me into a field that I now can't imagine my life without.

THE OTHER THING THAT WAS getting me down was the relationship I was in. I had met my first serious boyfriend when I was 15 through playing sport. It sounds like a good thing, but it wasn't.

He was 10 years older than me—25 to my 15—and very charming. The relationship went on to last six years, but I knew after the first three months that it wasn't right.

Looking back, I feel like he was the classic emotionally abusive partner: controlling and manipulative. He'd give me glimpses of kindness, to keep me hooked, but most of the time he was horrible to me. He'd call me fat and awful and unattractive, and tell me that I'd never amount to anything and that no one else would ever want me. In hindsight, I realise that he was just expressing his own insecurities: he could see how amazing I was and that I could do anything I wanted, but he was scared I would leave him. He just pushed me further and further down until I felt like I had no self-confidence.

Because he was always telling me how fat I was, I'd try to go on diets for him. He would be really supportive at the start, but then deliberately sabotage

my attempts, doing things like bringing me home greasy takeaways. I realise now that he never meant to help me; he was just trying to make me feel worse about myself. First I was fat, then I had no willpower and couldn't even stick to a diet.

He controlled everything I did. I wasn't allowed to go out with my friends, or to attend family functions. He tried to isolate me, and I had to lie to him about where I was heading if I wanted to go out without him.

My whole family could see straight through him right away, but I was constantly fighting his corner and trying to show them what a great guy he was. My self-esteem was so battered that I felt I had no way of leaving the relationship, so I had to prove to myself and others that he was okay.

My whole family could see straight through him right away, but I was constantly fighting his corner and trying to show them what a great guy he was.

Mum tried to be supportive of me. She told me it was my decision to stay with him and promised she wouldn't interfere, but it must have been so hard for her to see me with a partner like that. She didn't want my relationship with him to come between us, so she always tried to be welcoming towards him, as much as she disliked him.

I FELT SO TRAPPED IN the relationship and so down about myself that I couldn't see any way out. By the time I was 21 we were renting a house together, and my misery was growing by the day. When there were about two or three months left to go on the lease, a friend who was going flatting encouraged me to come and join her. Finally, after six years, I knew this was my chance to escape.

Part of me had known all along that it was a bad relationship, and now that part came to the fore and drew the line. I told myself I didn't want to be stuck in the relationship forever, and that no matter what he threatened me with, I was going to leave. I didn't even care if I had to get a loan and pay out the remainder of the lease—I just wanted out.

I started packing up my stuff, and when he came home that day I told him I was leaving. He lost the plot. He ranted and raved, smashed a glass table and

was so violent, threatening and awful that I had to call the police. My family came over and helped me move my stuff, and I ended up going flatting with that friend—and taking out a restraining order against him.

In the first week after I left, I had hundreds and hundreds of phone calls and texts from him, alternately threatening and pleading with me, until I had to get Vodafone to block his number. I blocked him on all social media, too. Once that was done, I heard nothing from him for a long time, thank goodness. Our lives went in completely different directions.

About three years later I unblocked him on Facebook just to see what would happen, and within a few hours—literally—he had messaged me. He apologised for everything, saying he'd love to be my friend and be back in my life. I replied, making it clear that there was no part of me that wanted to be friends with him: even though I was over all the hurt he had caused me, I knew there was no chance of a real friendship. Then I blocked him again, because it was obvious that if I didn't, all the calling and messaging would start again. And I've had no contact with him ever since.

Food was definitely a comfort mechanism for me. I enjoyed cooking and I enjoyed eating; it satisfied me at a time when nothing else made me happy.

I know that there were so many elements of our relationship that contributed to my weight gain. I constantly felt awful about myself, and the only thing that made me feel okay was whipping up some yummy food—well, what I thought was yummy at the time! Food was definitely a comfort mechanism for me. I enjoyed cooking and I enjoyed eating; it satisfied me at a time when nothing else made me happy. Food was that friend who would pick me up and make me feel better for a while. Plus, every time I tried to do something good for myself or curb my overeating, my boyfriend would just criticise me and drag me back down again.

It upsets me now that it took me six years to get out of what was such a terrible relationship but, to look on the positive side, I think it taught me exactly what I *didn't* want in a partner. I never want to be surrounded by that negativity again, or to live in that kind of atmosphere of fear and nastiness. The experience showed me that I am strong enough to be by myself, and to walk away from situations that are bad for me. I don't need to rely on another

person and I can be happy in myself without having to have a partner—especially one who is constantly bringing me down.

While I take ownership of the fact that I got so fat—I was the one eating badly and not exercising—that relationship was definitely a big contributor. I'm glad that I have been able to learn from it and move on.

CHAPTER 4

GOING DOWNHILL

I REMEMBER ONE PARTICULAR DAY near the height of my weight gain so clearly, although I wish I didn't. It was a beautiful summer's day, and some friends invited me to go out to Anawhata beach on the west coast of Auckland.

'Sure,' I said, excited about the idea. What kind of 22-year-old girl doesn't want to go and hang out at the beach with her friends?

When we got there, there was a 10-minute walk downhill to the beach. No problem, right? But as I was walking downhill, all I could think the whole time was, *How am I going to get back up?*

We had a great time at the beach, but eventually it was time to return to the car. *This is it*, I thought, bracing myself.

It took my friends about 10 minutes, and it took me an hour and a half. That's right: *an hour and a half*. I struggled on every single step. I could barely breathe.

I was so embarrassed, especially in front of the guys. I hated my friends seeing me like that. I had one girlfriend who walked with me and encouraged me, but I just felt mortified. I was so ashamed that, at the age of 22, I couldn't even go to the beach with friends without it turning into a huge drama.

It wasn't just that one time, either. After that, when friends asked me to do things I would often come up with excuses not to go—anything to avoid getting into a situation where my weight was going to be an issue. Even if I

had nothing else on, I would say I was busy. I was so worried that there would be some kind of physical activity involved, and that I wouldn't be able to do it.

It's just the little things, you know? Like trying to pick a chair to sit on at a party. If you're not morbidly obese, you probably haven't spent much time analysing which items of furniture are going to hold your weight. But that was my reality. I remember going out for drinks with friends one time, spotting a bunch of flimsy-looking plastic chairs around a table and thinking, *There's just no way—I can't sit on those*. If I did have to sit on something I was worried about, I would lower myself down really slowly, hoping the legs wouldn't buckle beneath me.

Plane trips were the worst—it got to the point where a standard-size seatbelt wouldn't go around me. I was too embarrassed to ask for an extender, so I would arrange my arms or my clothing to hide the fact that I didn't have the belt done up. Just as well I was never in a plane crash! One day one of the flight attendants was more vigilant than usual and actually asked me if I had the belt done up. I had to say no, so she got me an extender. She was really nice about it, but again, I was mortified that I was *that* person: the one who was too fat to do up their seatbelt. It was uncomfortable to fly, too—it was hard to get my bottom and thighs into the seat in the first place, then my thighs would fill up the space so I couldn't use the control buttons on the inside of the seat arm. I'd be scared to move in case I was too wedged in to get up and it turned into a scene.



I've always loved the beach, but that day climbing the hill at Anawhata was a low point. Here's a classic set of before-and-after photos in my togs.

Whenever I was supermarket shopping, I'd try to hide the naughty food under other things in the trolley, because I felt like people were judging me.

In reality, my weight was controlling my life but, for some reason, when I looked at the overall picture I didn't see it that way. I didn't want to admit it was affecting me as much as it was.

Subconsciously, I was having to make decisions all the time about what I did or where I went, just to work around my weight. It impacted on everything I did. If I was having a shower, I had to find the biggest towel possible so I could get it around me (it was an amazing day on my weight-loss journey when I found I could wrap a 'normal' towel around myself and actually be covered!). It affected what clothing stores I could shop at. Some shop assistants wouldn't even try to help me because of my size. I found this really tough, because I love clothes and I love looking good, and the options available to me were getting narrower and narrower. When I was at my

largest, City Chic was one of the only shops that offered fashionable clothes I could fit into, and I had reached the biggest size they stocked. I knew that if I got any bigger, it would get a lot harder to buy clothes and yet another thing about my life would become difficult.

This realisation was actually one of those ‘I have to do something’ moments—I wasn’t necessarily ready to lose weight, but I definitely didn’t want to get any bigger. I’d have to start wearing nana clothes, and that would be unbearable! If I couldn’t wear nice clothes like my friends and peers anymore, that would be another nail in the coffin as far as I was concerned.

WHEN I LOOK BACK, I don’t know how I had the energy to work, especially when my job was looking after little children. I was so tired all the time. Physically, I could still do housework and cooking and other chores, but I would be absolutely shattered by them. When I played with the kids it would be sitting-down board games or art; anything that didn’t involve me running around. If we went to the park, I’d be sitting on the bench watching them play rather than joining in. They’d want me to push them on the swings or help them climb, and I just couldn’t do it. Everything was a massive effort.

By the afternoon of each day I would be utterly fatigued—even if I hadn’t been doing much. Just carrying that amount of weight around is exhausting; it’s like carrying another whole person. My joints ached, and I was constantly hurting my ankles—I thought I was just clumsy, but basically they weren’t coping with my weight and were failing on me. My back was so sore that some days I could barely walk because of the pain. My blood pressure and cholesterol were through the roof, and my overall health was deteriorating quickly.

My doctor would regularly advise me to lose weight, and would suggest trying different diets and other remedies. And, believe me, I tried. I tried every diet going, including some of the best-known programmes as well as obscure ones that I came across on my own. I remember one meal plan in which breakfast was a single piece of sliced ham, fried in the frying pan with no oil, plus a handful of nuts and seeds with LSA powder. The nuts were fine but the powder would make me dry-heave. I’d vomit trying to get it down, then I’d eat my piece of ham and I’d still be starving.

My doctor would regularly advise me to lose weight, and

**would suggest trying different diets and other remedies.
And, believe me, I tried.**

I also tried taking those prescription diet pills that stop your body from absorbing fat. Supposedly, any fat you eat just gets pooped right out. Sounds good in theory? Well, let me tell you, they're disgusting. I was taking those pills when I was at uni, and one day I had this yellow stuff start coming out of my bottom in the middle of a lecture. I literally couldn't control it. I had to run to the bathroom and it was all through my pants. It was horrible.

The other thing about those pills was that I found it really hard not to eat fat by accident, even when I was genuinely trying to be healthy. There are hidden fats in so many foods, and I never knew what was going to get flushed out. I had to make sure I was near a bathroom at all times, just in case something disagreed with me—violently!

**Everything I tried—diets, pills, exercise regimes—was just
a short-term fix; it didn't change anything about my
relationship with food.**

Everything I tried—diets, pills, exercise regimes—was just a short-term fix; it didn't change anything about my relationship with food. Mum would put me on four-day fruit cleanses where I'd eat nothing but fruit and try to 'flush' the fat out, but they were never going to work long term.

It even got to the stage where my parents were offering me money: \$100 for every kilo I lost! I remember losing 10 kg and getting \$1000 and thinking that was amazing—but it didn't last. I knew I could do it if I really tried, and it felt great when I was losing weight, but as soon as I stopped focusing I'd fall back into bad habits and the weight would pile back on again, often with a few more kilos on top. The changes I was making just weren't sustainable.

On some of these diets I'd literally just count calories. I'd study the backs of packets and try to keep my total calories as low as possible, which meant I was often eating foods that had almost no nutritional value. I was losing weight, but it wasn't making me healthy. If half a chocolate bar had 100 calories, and so did a handful of nuts, I'd go for the chocolate bar every time. I'd have that for lunch and wonder why I felt hungry again almost straight

away, and then I'd end up snacking. Those foods weren't giving me any nutrients, but all I cared about was eating as few calories as possible because I knew that way I would eventually lose some weight. The problem was that the minute I started eating 'normally' again, the weight would just come back.

I wasn't doing any exercise, either, so all the focus was on controlling my food intake. I had kept up playing water polo for a social team once I finished high school, but it got harder and harder to make it up and down the pool, until eventually I stopped playing altogether.

Exercising became more of a horrible chore than something I enjoyed or got a buzz out of. It was like a punishment; if I felt I'd eaten too much that day, I'd swim for twice as long, hating every minute of it.

Sometimes I'd make a plan to exercise and I'd force myself to swim for an hour every day, but the regime wouldn't last very long. I just couldn't get motivated to keep it up. Exercising became more of a horrible chore than something I enjoyed or got a buzz out of. It was like a punishment; if I felt I'd eaten too much that day, I'd swim for twice as long, hating every minute of it.

So all these things were going on for me, but most of the time I tried not to think about them. Obviously my weight wasn't something I was proud of, and it made me feel terrible if I let myself dwell on it, but for some reason I just wasn't ready to face up to the fact that I was seriously, dangerously overweight. I told myself that I was fine. But over time, all the issues that came with my size did start contributing to me feeling really, really down.

CHAPTER 5

THE TURNING POINT

IT WAS AT THIS TIME, in 2014, that I started interning at the jewellery factory where my friend Chantelle was working. I have always loved ‘bling’ and accessories, so it was a really fun thing to do. I got paid in amazing products and I learned to design my own jewellery. Because I had been getting so large, accessories had become my best friends—they were something I could still fit, and I loved playing with them and combining them in different ways.

As well as getting to see how beautiful things were designed and produced, I enjoyed spending more time with Chantelle. She was so positive and energetic, and really seemed to have this ‘healthy living’ thing all sorted out. Every day when we ate our meals together I noticed how she made good food choices, never ate too much, and even managed to allow herself a few treats without going overboard.

While I was breakfasting on pies and doughnuts from the bakery, Chantelle would be having a healthy breakfast of eggs or fruit.

While I was breakfasting on pies and doughnuts from the bakery, Chantelle would be having a healthy breakfast of eggs or fruit.

I didn't think much about it at the time, but every day as we talked about the healthy foods she was tucking into, and I witnessed her good eating habits in action, the reality of my poor diet started to sink in a little bit. Eating with Chantelle made me realise that my lifestyle was different to other people's—obviously, I knew not everyone had a pie for breakfast, but it hadn't seemed so bad to me! Her whole family ate the way she did and it was just natural to her.

Her diet didn't involve anything ridiculous or excessive; it was just good, healthy eating in sensible portions. Maybe once a month, her treat would be a bagel. For me, a bagel (or two) was an everyday thing. Our meals together also made me realise how much more I ate than she did; what she'd eat for lunch wouldn't fill me up at all, yet she was stuffed and sometimes couldn't finish what was on her plate.

When you hang out with friends socially it's hard to judge what their normal eating habits are like, but spending time with Chantelle on a daily basis gave me the opportunity to observe someone else's diet up close—and made me realise how horrific mine was. I knew my diet wasn't great, but I hadn't comprehended how disgusting it really was. Nothing I was eating had any nutritional value. I could eat large quantities of food, but none of it was good for me, and none of it was giving my body what it needed—it was simply making me fat.

Working with Chantelle also made me think about the physical state I was in. Walking up the stairs to the office was hard. Where I was living, with a friend and her dad, we would take turns bringing the bins in each week. When my turn came around I would sit in my room for up to an hour, having to psych myself up before I could go downstairs, walk up the driveway (and it wasn't a long driveway) and pull the bins back to the house. I would be giving myself a pep talk—*You've got this; you know you can do it*—just to face having to walk up a little slope pulling an empty wheelie bin.

Sometimes, when I was going out, I would drive around town for more than an hour trying to find a carpark as close as possible to my destination, just so I could walk the shortest distance. Even now when I'm in the car I still have that mentality sometimes. I'll be driving around thinking, *Oh, I won't park there, it's not close enough*. I have to remind myself, *Just take it! Park the car and walk the rest of the way! It'll take two minutes!* It's the same with things like going to the supermarket or the gym; I automatically go and get in my car, even if where I'm heading is just across the road. I got so used

to working out ways to exert myself as little as possible—just so I could survive the day—that it’s been a hard habit to break.

LITTLE BY LITTLE, THESE THOUGHTS had been building up in me and, every now and then, I would contemplate making some real changes—finally losing weight and getting healthy, changing my diet, starting to live the life of a normal 23-year-old. But I didn’t know how to begin. It had been months since I’d been able to weigh myself and, above all, I was curious to know how much I had gained. I realised that the first step was to find out.

I had tried all the scales at home and at friends’ houses but all they would give me was the reading ‘ERROR’—most of them only measured up to 100 kg. I knew there was a large commercial scale downstairs at the factory that was about to be sold and, if I was going to use it, my time had come. Within days that big scale would be gone, so it was my last chance.

You’ll remember what happened next. When the others in the office took their lunch break, I made an excuse and snuck down the stairs. I was hoping no one could see me from the lunchroom. I hopped on as quickly as I could, read the figure—169 kg—then got straight back off.

I was in shock. The last time I’d weighed myself I’d been 150 kg, so in under two years I’d not only failed to lose any weight, I’d put on another 20 kg.

Back in the office, I started bawling my eyes out. It was terrifying. I felt so out of control, like this was something I had no hope of fixing. Fear was my main emotion: *What if I can’t stop this? What if I never lose that weight? What if I just keep on getting bigger and bigger until I die?*

I felt really trapped—I knew I couldn’t continue on the path I was on, but I had no idea how I was going to turn things around. I just knew I couldn’t ignore it any longer. How could I pretend my weight wasn’t affecting me? I was 23 years old, and yet I could barely walk.

I didn’t want to get to the age of 30 and find that I was trapped in my bedroom, unable to get through the doorway.

I didn’t want to get to the age of 30 and find that I was trapped in my

bedroom, unable to get through the doorway. I wanted to get married. I wanted to have kids. There was so much I wanted to do with my life, and I hadn't even started living.

I SPENT THE REST OF that day thinking about what I was going to do. How was I going to lose weight? How was I going to make it work this time, when every other diet or exercise programme I had tried in the past had failed, or made my weight even worse?

One thing I had noticed with diets in the past was that the more people I told, the more accountable I felt, and the more support I had around me to encourage me to succeed.

That's when the thought came to me: what if this time I shared my efforts with all my friends on Facebook? Pretty much everyone I knew was on Facebook, so that would get the word out much more effectively than just telling my mum and one or two close friends. I already had a pretty big circle of friends on Facebook—about 1500—so that would mean a lot of people watching me succeed or fail.

It seemed like a good plan, but it did take me a few days to work up the courage to make the post. I called Mum that evening to talk to her about how I was feeling and how I wanted to make some changes, and she thought it was a really cool idea to go public. She knows me and she knows that if I set my mind to something I can do it. And *will* do it—I'm stubborn that way! It was good to know that Mum had my back and that she would support me in what was going to be, literally, the fight of my life.

The next step was deciding how I was going to attack my weight loss. I didn't want to take on another restrictive 'diet', limiting what I ate to certain foods and following complicated rules. I knew I couldn't just cut out all the foods I enjoyed, except for the obvious stuff like greasy takeaways and too many lollies; I had to keep living and make sustainable changes that were going to help me long-term. I decided I was going to try to eat as well as I could, and if I wanted a piece of bread, or a potato, I could have it.

In the end, my plan was simple: eat as clean as possible and do an hour of exercise a day. My goal was to lose half my body weight in a year, which would bring me down to 84.5 kg, a healthy weight for my height (I'm 6 foot, which is 1.8 metres) and hopefully reduce or eliminate all the health risk factors associated with being massively obese.

It took me four days to publish the post that made my challenge public—four days of non-stop tears every time I thought about doing it. I had my first post all planned out in my head: a photo of me in my bra and underpants, showing everything. I went back and forth in my mind over and over again, weighing up the pros and cons, trying to decide if I was really ready to bare myself to the world and make myself accountable.

It took me four days to publish the post that made my challenge public—four days of non-stop tears every time I thought about doing it.

Finally, I took a selfie, loaded the photo, wrote the text and pressed ‘post’. Then I stood back and took a breath. But instead of feeling panicky or scared or sick, like I had done for the previous four days, I just felt relieved. Finally, it was out there.

I felt so motivated. I knew that this time, I was going to do it. I was going to lose half my body weight—84.5 kg—in a year. I was confident that if I just stuck to the plan, I could do it.

I did the calculations, and worked out that I needed to lose an average of 1.6 kg a week—which is a lot, but then I had a lot to lose. It was a bit daunting, but I’d watched shows like *The Biggest Loser* and I knew that it was possible to lose weight at that rate if you stuck to a diet and exercise plan. I told myself that even if I didn’t quite reach that goal, I was going to give it all I could in the next year.

If I’d had any idea then that posting one little picture was going to lead to everything that followed—massive weight loss, skin-removal surgery, worldwide fame and more than 300,000 followers on social media—would I still have done it?

Of course. The genie was out of the bottle. There was no turning back.

CHAPTER 6

STARTING ON THE JOURNEY

30.8.14 (Day 1)

Weight	Clothing size (top)		Clothing size (bottom)		
169 kg	28		28/30		
Chest	Upper arm	Waist	Hips	Thigh	Bra
138 cm	48 cm	130 cm	170 cm	93 cm	22DD

AFTER THE POST WENT LIVE, my friends and family were incredibly supportive. The messages and feedback I received were all so encouraging: we know you can do this, go for it, you're amazing. I knew that what I was hearing was not the full story—some people would be talking about me behind my back and some probably didn't believe I could do it—but what I was receiving was really positive, and I took it.

Once the initial adrenaline rush of making the post wore off, I went back to feeling scared and anxious. I was shaking, I was in tears, I could barely breathe, I felt sick. I wanted to unpublish it a hundred times. Up until then I had been the girl who wouldn't leave the house without a cardigan on, even on a hot day, and here I was on the internet in my underwear, with all my

tummy rolls hanging out, for everyone who knew me to see: friends, friends of friends, boys I liked, people I'd never even met. I was sharing every part of me and it was terrifying.

I just had to hang on to the vision of how great it would be to have a fit, healthy body, and how it would feel when I was no longer embarrassed about my weight. That was what kept me motivated. The idea of finally being proud of my shape was more powerful than my doubts.

I DIDN'T SET OUT WITH a clear idea of how often or what I would post; social media was just for fun back then. If I did something or ate something that I was proud of, I would think, *I'd like to share this*—just like everyone does with Facebook. Because I was so focused on food and exercise, I found there was usually something to post about every day or at least every couple of days.

It was just little stuff—perhaps I'd been for a walk or a swim, or eaten some really tasty mango—but it was a way of showing the people who were supporting me that I was working towards my goals, that I was making an effort. I knew that for other people a 45-minute walk with a girlfriend might be nothing, but for me it was huge, and that's all I cared about: I was doing something so out of the ordinary for me that it was worth posting about.

I knew that for other people a 45-minute walk with a girlfriend might be nothing, but for me it was huge, and that's all I cared about.

After about three weeks I decided to set up a dedicated page for my weight-loss journey. I called it 'Simone's Journey to Health' and invited those who were interested to follow. For me, it was a way of documenting everything I did, like my own little diary that I shared with friends and family. I thought that if I shared the things that were keeping me on track, more people would read and interact with my posts, and the more motivated I would feel to keep going.

At this early stage it was mostly just friends and family who were following me, but after a while I started getting friends of friends as well. The first time someone I didn't know started following me, I thought, *Why on*

earth would someone do that? Why would you want to see what I'm up to? That seemed really weird to me. Then it was happening more and more—friends of friends of friends were following, and that was really bizarre. I also felt a bit unsure about what they were getting out of it. What were they seeing? It made me question what I was posting, too—it was one thing to be sharing things that my friends and family were going to see, but when people who didn't know me were reading my posts, I had second thoughts about some of the personal stuff.

But I said to myself at the start, *This is just me and I need to be honest.* I decided that if I wanted to post something I would go ahead and do it, even if I feared that some people might not agree with it. If people thought I was showing too much skin, or that I shouldn't be putting pictures of my fat body on the internet, that was their problem. I knew that I just had to share, because this was about me being as honest as I could, showing both the good and the bad sides of extreme weight loss rather than trying to present a sanitised version.

I decided that if I wanted to post something I would go ahead and do it, even if I feared that some people might not agree with it. If people thought I was showing too much skin, or that I shouldn't be putting pictures of my fat body on the internet, that was their problem.

There were so many positive things happening to me that I never expected to happen, and I wanted to share them, not only with people I knew but also with others who might be going through a similar journey, or might wonder what it was really like. Weight loss is not just the glorified version you see on *The Biggest Loser*, where suddenly these once-fat people look amazing. You don't see their struggles with loose skin or chafing. I wanted to be honest about the things no one talks about.

LOOKING BACK NOW, I CAN see that most of my early posts were about food.

30.8.14

Roasted chicken, feta and egg salad—need to work on my presentation skills, ha ha! Looks like a mess but it was delicious. To anyone else this would just be a salad, but to me this signifies a change in my lifestyle. No more ‘I’m hungover so I can eat crap’ . . . despite being deathly hungover I got my arse to the gym and I’ve made some fresh yummy food. Day one is on track, now to keep the next 364 days the same. Feeling motivated!

I remember that salad: it was basically pre-cooked chicken from a packet arranged on top of salad from a packet and it looked awful, but I felt really proud of myself. It was my first attempt at making myself a healthy meal and it tasted a lot better than it looked. To anyone else it would have seemed a pretty ordinary meal, but for me it was a huge deal. It said, ‘I’m going to do this—I’ve got to do this.’ It wasn’t going to get me a spot on *MasterChef*, but it was a big step in the right direction.

Didn’t have time to make porridge after the gym this morning, so a smoothie was a quick alternative. It took two minutes to make this mixed berry, banana, mango and passionfruit smoothie.

Tonight I made a cauliflower pizza base for the first time—and it wasn’t too much of a disaster.

Because my sweet cravings won’t go away overnight I have made myself a healthy sweet snack. This is popcorn popped in coconut oil and tossed in 85% cocoa dark chocolate and crushed almonds.

SHARING THESE POSTS WAS a good way to keep me motivated, but my preoccupation with eating was indicative of a problem I was becoming more and more aware of: my unhealthy relationship with food.

When I first started out I wasn't too worried about portion sizes. The big battle was just making sure I was eating good things: whole foods that were full of nutrients and were going to give me energy and make me feel good, rather than the processed stuff I had eaten in the past (which might have been low-calorie but had very little nutritional value). That meant lots of salads, veges and lean protein. Because I wanted the changes to be sustainable, and I didn't want to feel like I was depriving myself, I decided I would eat until I was satisfied, which meant I still ended up eating a lot of food. (One estimate I had from my doctor suggested my stomach had stretched to around a 2-litre capacity—about twice the size of a normal adult stomach!)

Before long, however, I realised I would have to make another change. I was losing a bit of weight but I knew that, even though I was eating foods that were good for me, I was still physically consuming too much to lose weight over the long term. So I started to decrease my portion sizes as well, and that's when I began to see some results.

CHAPTER 7

GETTING MOVING

6.9.14 (Week 1)

Weight	Clothing size (top)		Clothing size (bottom)		
164.8 kg	28		28/30		
Chest	Upper arm	Waist	Hips	Thigh	Bra
135 cm	48 cm	128 cm	166 cm	92 cm	22DD

A morning walk and fresh mango to start my Saturday. Today marks a week since I began my journey, and so far I'm 4.2 kg lighter and a few of my measurements have started to show changes.

SEEING A MEASURABLE IMPACT IN that first week was a huge confidence boost to me. The changes that I'd made were having an effect! It was working! That was so motivating. I told myself, *If this is what you've achieved in a week, imagine what you can do in a year!*

To really grasp what I was achieving, Mum made me go to the supermarket and gather up 4 kg of butter to hold—that's eight blocks. That's

a lot of fat! Because she's a baker and a cook, she would always talk to me about how much I'd lost in terms of blocks of butter, and it became a fun thing to do for my Facebook posts. I'd regularly go to Countdown Greenlane and photograph myself with a stack of butter from the fridge, creating a very visual reminder of what I was losing.

I'd regularly go to Countdown Greenlane and photograph myself with a stack of butter from the fridge, creating a very visual reminder of what I was losing.

When you're going through weight loss, the changes don't seem that dramatic at first—you look the same in the mirror every day. Your clothes might fit a bit differently, but you get used to imagining yourself at the size you've been. So, even though I got some funny looks in the supermarket, it was worth it to really cement the weight loss in my mind, and to show people who were following my journey exactly how much weight I had lost. And because it was butter, it literally represented the fat I was losing.

When I repeated the supermarket exercise over the course of my weight loss, I got asked lots of questions about what I was doing, especially by the time I was gathering up 50 or 60 kg of butter. Other customers would say things like, 'Do you own a dairy?' And when I had to explain to the staff that I was taking it all out only to put it back again, they sometimes went a bit cross-eyed! I would try to do it quickly and a bit sneakily, but it's pretty hard to hide the fact you're filling up a shopping trolley with butter.



Loading my trolley with 120 blocks of butter (60 kg) at Countdown Greenlane.

I really wanted to keep it up throughout the journey as a reminder of my progress but when I got to around 70 kg it was just getting ridiculous—I was too embarrassed to waltz into Countdown and load up with 140 blocks of butter. I might have been banned for life!

13.9.14 (Week 2)

Weight	Clothing size (top)		Clothing size (bottom)		
162.4 kg	28		28		
Chest	Upper arm	Waist	Hips	Thigh	Bra
134 cm	47 cm	128 cm	166 cm	90 cm	22DD

Bun-less burgers for lunch today, made with iceberg lettuce, capsicum,

carrot, spring onion, red onion, beetroot and feta. Today it's been two weeks and I'm 6.6 kg down!

20.9.14 (Week 3)

Weight	Clothing size (top)		Clothing size (bottom)		
160.55 kg	26		28		
Chest	Upper arm	Waist	Hips	Thigh	Bra
133 cm	46 cm	126 cm	163 cm	90 cm	22D

Today is three weeks since I began. I have lost 7 cm from my hips, and of course my boobs are the first thing to drastically shrink! I've dropped 8.45 kg in total now.

WHILE GETTING MY EATING ONTO a healthy track was a major factor, the other big piece of the puzzle was exercise. I knew I needed to get my arse off the couch and start doing something physical. As I've mentioned before, even minor activities like collecting the bins were hard for me at that point, so it was important to pick things that I enjoyed, and to motivate myself with rewards and goals. I still loved swimming, and that was something I could do without putting too much stress and strain on my joints. Running was out of the question (I still don't like running) but walking was okay. I committed myself to an hour's exercise each day as part of my programme. I also bought myself some nice gym gear and shared a photo of it on Facebook: a new gym bag, workout pants, drink bottle and shoes, all ready to go. If food couldn't be my reward, then I needed other ways to motivate myself.

After a few weeks, I realised that if I was going to lose this weight I would have to tone up as I went, otherwise I would end up a baggy mass of loose skin with no fat under it. I looked online and found a gym close to me that wasn't too expensive—City Fitness was \$7 a week, which I felt I could justify because it was the equivalent of one takeaway meal (or even less). Even though I didn't have a lot of money back then I knew it was important to commit to something like this, and \$7 a week wasn't going to break the

bank.

I knew some people who belonged to the same gym, including my friend Amy, who was really into exercise and went every day. I asked her to show me how the machines worked and to recommend a few exercises that would be good for me. It was quite difficult at first, because she suggested exercises such as box jumps, which were impossible at my weight. I had to adapt them—step up onto and off the box, for example. Healthy-weight people don't realise that being massively obese affects everything you do. I could no more jump up onto a box than I could fly to the moon!

So in the beginning I focused mainly on body-weight exercises: things like push-ups or lunges where you use the weight of your own body rather than free weights or machines. I didn't need to be lifting any more weight—I had enough weight on me! Just leaning against a wall and pushing myself back upright was more than enough.

**I would always choose the stairs rather than taking the lift,
and I started parking a little further away from where I
was going so I could build in a bit of a walk.**

I found myself wanting to do as much exercise as I could each day. If I'd gone for a walk on my own in the morning and a girlfriend asked me to go again with her that evening, I'd do two walks. I would always choose the stairs rather than taking the lift, and I started parking a little further away from where I was going so I could build in a bit of a walk. All these little things added up to keeping me on my feet as much as possible during the day. I was still nannying at this stage, too, and little kids certainly keep you active!

It helped having a good friend who was a regular gym-goer. Amy was always encouraging me to come along, calling me up and making gym dates with me. It was too hard to say no, and I was grateful to have someone pushing me. Even when I didn't feel like going I knew she'd be there, so I had to get my arse down there as well or I'd feel guilty!

A month or so after joining, I was working out at the gym when I was approached by a lovely lady named Nicole Alyce. We got talking, and I told her about my goals. She said she was a personal trainer and that she wanted to help me. I explained that I couldn't afford to have a PT, but she really

wanted to be part of my journey so she offered to train me for free. I think she saw the drive in me and a will to succeed that she hadn't come across for a long time.

We started out doing one or two sessions a week, and she also gave me brilliant ideas for exercises that I could do by myself on the days she wasn't there. Nicole was a very good influence on me; another person who was holding me accountable. I had to check in with her every week and tell her how I was going, how many times I'd gymmed and the progress I was making. I couldn't lie to her—she could see my gym attendance card at the counter!

Nicole had been on her own weight-loss journey (not quite as dramatic as mine), so she really understood where I was coming from and what I wanted to achieve. I still have a session with her once a week—she has remained a constant throughout my journey. I love her to bits, and I was honoured to be asked to be maid of honour at her wedding in 2018. It's really become a true friendship rather than a trainer–client relationship. So big thanks, Nicole!

CHAPTER 8

THE BATTLE WITH FOOD

REDUCING THE AMOUNT I ATE, as well as what I ate, made me realise how hungry I felt all the time—and how much food had been dominating my life. It was controlling everything I did. Even though I was eating different things, and healthier things, food was still the single most important thing in my life. At morning tea, I'd be thinking about what I was going to have for lunch. At lunchtime, I'd already be planning my afternoon tea. And, after that, dinner. It was constant.

And it wasn't just that day's menu that occupied my mind—I would think about what I was going to eat later that week and beyond, especially if I had an event coming up. I would get excited if I knew I was having a meal out with a friend, looking up the menu of the restaurant online and planning what I was going to order. Once I realised what I was doing I felt awful; I could see that I was really controlled by it, and I didn't want my life to carry on that way. I didn't want *What can I eat next?* to be my thought track every day. It felt wrong. It's not healthy to think about food that much.

My preoccupation with food made it really hard to maintain my diet. If I was out, all I would be thinking about was where I could stop and get some something to eat. I would have to force myself not to nip into the dairy and buy a bag of chips as I was driving past. It became a constant battle in my mind.

I felt I needed to come up with a plan of action. I was keen to find ways to make food fun—to make healthy food look and taste good so that I would want to choose it instead of the salty, fatty, sugary stuff that I was used to eating.

My diet had been so, so poor and so convenience-food-based that it was difficult to wrap my head around the changes I needed to make to prepare healthy, nutritious meals. Getting food had been so easy, but now it suddenly became a task.

I felt I needed to come up with a plan of action. I was keen to find ways to make food fun—to make healthy food look and taste good so that I would want to choose it instead of the salty, fatty, sugary stuff that I was used to eating. Making healthy choices just because I had to, without actually liking the food, wasn't sustainable; you can only force yourself to eat foods you don't like for so long before you rebel. So I challenged myself to make my food as interesting and tasty as possible—to create meals I could look forward to and be excited about eating, rather than feeling it was a chore.

I'm not someone who eats just because my body needs fuel. I find eating an enjoyable, sociable activity, and I get satisfaction from presenting food beautifully. They say you eat with your eyes first, and I agree. I want my food to be colourful and to look appealing and tasty, as well as being good to eat.

My mum is a great cook, so I drew inspiration from her, asking for recipes for the things I had enjoyed in childhood and other tips and tricks. I spent a lot of time online googling recipes, or trawling through Instagram, blog sites and web pages for ideas.

When I found a recipe that looked good, I'd go through it and make it my own, picking out the elements I liked and rejecting the bits that weren't quite me. I might combine parts of it with another recipe, or swap out the veges or change how they were cooked. I kept experimenting and trying out new things to keep it interesting and fun.

The Goodful page on Facebook was another biggie. Once I started following it, a new tasty food idea would pop up in my feed every couple of days. It was a useful trigger—*Oh, I like courgettes and I could use them in that way*—and another source of inspiration for creating my own meals.

Initially, on my own Facebook page, I just wanted to share what I'd done

and eaten, but soon people started asking for recipes and details, so I made that part of my posts. In fact, that was the main reason I started my website. I could give a lot more information on there than I could in a Facebook post, with a series of images and step-by-step instructions if needed.

It wasn't all rainbows and butterflies for me when it came to healthy food, though. I still missed the bad stuff terribly. It was like looking back on a relationship that had been largely unhappy, but only remembering the good bits! For the first three months or so, it was as if my body was going through a massive detox.

It wasn't all rainbows and butterflies for me when it came to healthy food, though. I still missed the bad stuff terribly. It was like looking back on a relationship that had been largely unhappy, but only remembering the good bits!

I craved sugar something chronic, so I would allow myself little treats such as low-calorie jellies made with artificial sweeteners. I knew they weren't great for me nutrition-wise, but having just a little bit of them was enough to satisfy the craving.

In a way it was making things worse, though, because I was still giving my body a dose of sweet food and encouraging a desire for more. After a few months I decided to cut out artificially sweetened food and drinks as well. Eating those things was tricking my body into thinking it was getting sugar, so of course I still craved it.

That's when I started looking into a wholefood diet. When I felt like sweet food I could have something like a cacao treat, which is made entirely from natural products without artificial sweeteners and chemicals. I discovered that there were plenty of things that could provide that sweet element but were actually good for me. Many of them are made with nuts and dates, which might be higher in calories but also contain important nutrients, so they were a better choice for me than low- or no-calorie artificially sweetened foods.

Once I got used to this new way of eating, I knew that I would never go back. Nowadays, having half a protein bar for a snack actually makes me feel full, and I know it has done my body some good, rather than giving me a 'sugar' hit with chemicals that do nothing useful and just leave me craving more.

ANOTHER THING THAT I FELT I needed to do in order for my new lifestyle to succeed was to be totally organised. I am the kind of person who likes to have her ducks in a row, so I put those skills to work in sorting out my pantry and fridge.

One of the biggest traps with junk food is that it's so easily accessible; all you have to do is ask for it (and these days, you don't even have to talk to anyone, you can just order it online). Imagine if good, healthy food was that easy to get your hands on? I made sure all my healthy ingredients—fresh fruit and veges, lean meats, whole carbs, dairy and so on—were right at hand, stored in appropriate containers where I could get at them easily. My pantry was a visual symphony!

I knew that I was less likely to cheat and go for a non-healthy option when I had the ingredients close by and could whip up a healthy meal in 10 minutes tops. And to ensure I didn't make poor food choices when under time pressure, I prepped little batches of carrot sticks and other veges so they would be ready when I wanted to eat them. I portioned out treats into small containers so I could have a quick snack on them, too.

Once I had all my bits and pieces in their containers, labelled and with a home of their own, I felt more confident knowing that at least that part of my life was sorted. It didn't seem as hard to eat healthily when everything was prepped and ready to go.

Planning ahead was another huge thing for me; I knew that if I didn't plan I was going to fail. I needed to think at least a couple of days in advance about what I would be doing and where I would be going, and figure out how I could make healthy choices at each place, or else prepare and take along my own snacks.

Parties and events are fun to go to, but terrible when you are trying to lose weight. So much temptation gets put right in front of you in terms of snacks and drinks. And when you're on the go, like I am when I'm doing hair and makeup at events, it's easy to just pick at what's around you rather than being conscious of what's going in your mouth. I made sure I prepared healthy snacks and pre-cut items like vege sticks and fruit to take along with me. It was quite time-consuming and sometimes a bit of a hassle, but it would be worth it when I'd get to an event and find everyone else eating the show food. I would feel a little bit jealous at times, but mostly I was proud that I had my carrots and hummus or peanut butter and rice crackers with me—food that was still yummy and was actually good for me.

I'd do one big shop on a Sunday, then go back and top up on fresh items once or twice during the week. This was nothing like the haphazard way I used to do my shopping.

At the start of each week I would sit down and plan my meals and make a list of the groceries I needed to shop for. I would cook a big batch of some meals so that I could freeze portions for later, but others I would make from scratch on the day. Even though I needed convenience, I still wanted to enjoy cooking with fresh ingredients rather than have everything come straight out of the freezer.

I'd do one big shop on a Sunday, then go back and top up on fresh items once or twice during the week. This was nothing like the haphazard way I used to do my shopping, when I would just grab whatever I could get as soon as I felt hungry—whether it was takeaways or something from the bakery. I never had good food in the house back then.

In my revamped kitchen most of the ingredients were already cut up, so if I was making a stir fry or a breakfast smoothie, all I had to do was chuck all the elements in the pan or the blender and it was done. Everything was neat and tidy, so it was easy to throw a meal together. It took the stressful side of cooking away.

Of course, I am a super-organised person by nature, and I know that this kind of approach might not be everyone's thing, but it certainly helped me. Finding what works for you is the key.

CHAPTER 9

NEW CHALLENGES

ONE OF THE FIRST THINGS to go, much to my dismay if not my surprise, was my boobs. Within no time it seemed, my bras were gaping as the flesh melted off my breasts. As a woman who had quite enjoyed having curves, I was a bit bummed. Was I going to lose my boobs entirely and end up flat-chested? The loss was pretty dramatic—I was dropping sizes. After seven weeks I'd gone from a 22DD to a 20C. Believe me, that's quite a jump.

As a woman who had quite enjoyed having curves, I was a bit bummed. Was I going to lose my boobs entirely and end up flat-chested?



The progress shot I posted on 18 October 2014, seven weeks in and 15.5 kg down. I desperately needed some new bras.

18.10.14 (Week 7)

Weight	Clothing size (top)		Clothing size (bottom)		
153.85 kg	24		26		
Chest	Upper arm	Waist	Hips	Thigh	Bra
133 cm	45 cm	126 cm	163 cm	89 cm	20C

Today marks seven weeks since I began this life-changing journey. 15.15 kg gone as of this morning! This is a progress shot so far—yes, my bra is hanging off me because it no longer fits and it’s at least two cup sizes too big! Hahaha. My boobs said, ‘We volunteer as tribute . . .’

When I was at my biggest there had been only one shop where I'd been able to get bras: the plus-size shop City Chic that I mentioned earlier, which stocked clothing up to size 30. At the height of my weight gain, I was fitting into their largest size on my bottom half, and a 28 on top. But although I missed my boobs and hated seeing them waste away, I was cool with it, because it meant that what I was doing was working. I was changing, my body was changing, and my clothes were starting to become loose on me.

It did seem a bit unfair that my breasts were the first things to go, though! And I could tell even at this early stage that, if things kept up, I was going to have very saggy-looking breasts when this was over.

As my boobs shrank I would try to wait as long as I could before buying a new set of bras, because I knew I'd be paying for a lot of them as I got smaller. But eventually it would get ridiculous and I would have to go down another size. My knickers were getting smaller, too, but I would buy super-cheapies to keep me going—no point in having fancy knickers if you're only going to shrink right out of them!

Needing smaller clothing was a new issue I faced as I began to seriously lose weight—but it was a good one to be facing. In the past when I had lost a few kilos I had always hung on to my old clothes, because in the back of my mind I knew that I would put the weight back on again. Not this time, though! I decided I was getting rid of my 'fat' clothing and that I was never, ever going to wear that size again. There was no way I was going back there.

I started listing my too-big clothing on Trade Me and, while it didn't bring in a huge amount of money, it was definitely a moral victory. I had some really nice pieces and they got snapped up.

Since my transformation, media outlets often ask me to pose with some of my old clothing to show how much weight I've lost. The truth is, I got rid of it all! I wish I'd kept a few key pieces that I'd photographed myself in early on, so I could do the iconic 'before and after' shots. But in my head at the time, it was important to let go of that baggage and to move on from it. I needed to know that there was no going back to that size.

ONCE I HAD CHANGED MY habits, I knew I couldn't eat and drink as much as I did before, but I still wanted to be able to go out with friends and socialise. I tried to limit the times we went out for meals or drinks, and instead do my socialising over exercise at the gym, a walk on the beach or a

trip to the mall—anything that didn't involve sitting around eating and drinking.

When I did go out for meals, I was careful to make sensible choices in terms of what I ordered: having diet cola instead of wine, choosing salads over carbs, and avoiding dishes that were fried or served with rich sauces. I didn't want to deny myself completely, but I made sure I went for healthier options. It was hard work, though, so in the early stages of my journey I did cut back on dining out.

If I cut out everything 'bad', including alcohol, I was going to be miserable and I wouldn't want to stick at it. So alcohol stayed in—in moderation.

I talked to Mum a lot about how I was going to make my new lifestyle sustainable. She said that if I cut out everything 'bad', including alcohol, I was going to be miserable and I wouldn't want to stick at it. So alcohol stayed in—in moderation. To minimise the number of calories I was consuming, I drank vodka with soda and lime.

I know that alcohol has a lot of empty calories, but for me at that time, it was something I wasn't ready to give up. I was going through such a massive period of personal change, and I felt that I needed to cut loose sometimes. Being single was still new to me: I'd had only two years of freedom after being in a relationship for such a long time. Giving up alcohol and my social life entirely just wasn't an option.

The worst thing about drinking, apart from the empty calories, is the struggle to make healthy food choices the next day when you're dealing with a hangover! I tried to be really good on those occasions. Even though all I wanted to do was feed my hangover with a burger and fries, I would make myself a nice egg breakfast or some yummy porridge.

The worst thing about drinking, apart from the empty calories, is the struggle to make healthy food choices the next day when you're dealing with a hangover!

These days, I only drink occasionally. After my gastric surgery (see the

next chapter for more on that), I couldn't have alcohol for a couple of months, and once those had passed I decided that I wanted to go alcohol-free for another six to eight months. It really did give me a new perspective on things. I realised that I had been relying on having a drink to feel confident socially. I had assumed that I wouldn't enjoy myself if I didn't drink, so discovering that I could go out and have just as much fun as before—without consuming empty calories and facing the next day with a hangover—was a total revelation to me! It was possible to have a great night and still wake up in the morning feeling amazing. And it was a refreshing reminder: *Actually, I do have a personality, and I can chat to people without having a drink in my hand.* I've come to the conclusion that cutting back on drinking is part of growing up, too!



My drinking habits are among the many things that have changed!

WHILE I WAS LOSING WEIGHT, I needed to find ways of rewarding myself without turning to food. My major goal—to lose half my body weight—seemed very far away, so it was important to celebrate the little wins along the way. Whenever I reached a sub-goal, I'd buy myself a new piece of makeup or something like that. From time to time I would purchase pants that were one size too small (just cheapies, because I knew I wouldn't be in them for long and I didn't want to spend a fortune), knowing they were something I could work towards. I'd have them in my wardrobe and every couple of weeks I'd try them on, until one day they would do up and I could say, officially, 'I've gone down a size.' Then I'd have a new pair of pants to wear for a couple of weeks until I grew out of them (in a good way—downwards!).

Those little rewards were a nice thing to do for myself rather than treating myself with food. If I wanted a piece of chocolate I'd have a piece of chocolate, rather than saving it up as a 'reward' for denying myself and then eating the whole block. I didn't want to have that relationship with food anymore.

CHAPTER 10

DECIDING ON SURGERY

AFTER I'D BEEN ON MY NEW life plan for four weeks, I had to admit it to myself—I had a food addiction. It didn't matter that I had made a resolution to eat well and exercise; food was still controlling my life. I knew that if I didn't do something about it, I was not going to be able to sustain my habits in order to reach—and maintain—my goal weight.

My years of over-eating had stretched my stomach so much that it had a huge capacity. Even though I was making better food choices, I found that I could eat and eat and never be satisfied. I was still physically consuming too much each day, and thoughts of food and eating were dominating my waking hours. I couldn't live like that, thinking about food all the time but not being 'allowed' to eat it.

That's when I started looking around for other options. When I learned about bariatric or weight-loss surgery I knew it was the answer. Mum had a friend who'd had the surgery, so she arranged for me to meet and talk to her about what it had been like, and how it had worked in her case. Hearing about her experience of having a gastric bypass and the way she was living now, without food controlling her life, made me think, *Yes! If I can do something similar—if I can stop this never-ending cycle of thinking about food and wanting food—then I've got this.* I was already exercising and enjoying it, making healthy food choices and cooking nutritious meals. If I could just stop my body thinking that it needed to be fed all the time, and get my portions

under control, I knew that I could reach my goal.

If I could just stop my body thinking that it needed to be fed all the time, and get my portions under control, I knew that I could reach my goal.

I talked to my GP about it, and started researching surgeons in the Auckland area. I did investigate having the surgery done through the public hospital system, but my GP said that I wouldn't qualify because, surprisingly, I had no pressing health issues. It was possible that I would sit on the public waiting list for years and years until something *did* go seriously wrong. So it was the private route for me, which meant finding out how much it was going to cost (\$19,700 for the surgery alone, plus pre- and post-surgery appointments at \$300 a pop) and arranging for a bank loan to cover the fees. I was really lucky because once I started talking about the process, my Auntie Sonia offered to pay for my first appointment, which was amazing.

I chose Auckland Weight Loss Surgery, which is based at Ascot Hospital in Remuera, and my surgeon was Richard Babor. I'd heard really great things about this practice—I'd spoken to other people who'd had procedures done there and were very happy, and I'd read loads of patient reviews and comments on online forums, so I knew I was going to be in good hands.

Choosing an Auckland practice also meant that I could have the surgery reasonably close to home. I needed to be back at work shortly afterwards, so I didn't want to have to travel to another city. Having it done just down the road would be quite easy: I could get my grandparents to pick me up and then recover in my own flat over the weekend.

I took Mum along to my first meeting with Dr Babor, who was super-nice and happy to talk through all aspects of the surgery. Due to my age and physical health, he said he would recommend gastric-sleeve surgery. This is different to a gastric bypass: it's a newer technique that has fewer side effects and a higher success rate long term.

With a gastric bypass, the surgeon attaches a small pouch to your intestine so that food literally bypasses most of your stomach. You can get serious complications from this surgery; your stomach stops working in the normal way to break down food, and you can experience 'dumping'. This is when you eat something and it comes straight back up. With a sleeve, your stomach

still functions as normal but it's smaller. You're not really screwing with your digestive system too much, and I liked that idea.

A sleeve is not a physical sleeve. Basically the surgeon removes part of your stomach and stitches you back up, so the part that remains is physically smaller and shaped like a tube (or sleeve). Some doctors also offer lap-band surgery, which involves placing a band around the stomach to make it smaller, but the bands tend to move and it can be hard to achieve long-term, stable results.

With a gastric sleeve, food is still digested in the same way; you just can't eat as much.

With a gastric sleeve, food is still digested in the same way; you just can't eat as much. The procedure does affect some appetite-stimulating hormones that are normally produced, but apart from this, your stomach will process food and extract calories and nutrients in a relatively normal way.

While the amount you can eat is reduced—drastically at first, before building up again over time—you can tolerate all foods. This is different from a bypass, where you have to avoid certain foods afterwards. With a gastric sleeve you have a better chance of being able to return to eating a normal diet, rather than being restricted for the rest of your life.

A gastric sleeve can stretch out and your stomach can get bigger again, so it's not a silver bullet that will fix your life. It is something you need to use as a tool to help you form healthy habits, master portion control and learn to stop eating when you're full. It's about making long-term, sustainable changes.

I didn't ask Dr Babor too many questions—to my way of thinking this is what he does all day, every day, so I was happy to put my faith in his knowledge and experience and to trust him to decide what was best for me. At the end of our discussion, he said he could do the surgery in three weeks' time. *Three weeks?* I could hardly wait!

I left the session with Dr Babor knowing that gastric-sleeve surgery was what I wanted to have. He told me to go away and think about it, but I had already made up my mind. I went online and did even more research and I was sold. I called up and booked the surgery.

THE ONE DOWNSIDE TO PREPARING for the surgery was that I had to go on quite a severe diet beforehand to reduce the amount of fat around my internal organs. This makes the procedure easier for the doctor, and increases your chances of a successful recovery. Having surgery when you're overweight is risky at the best of times, and when you're dealing with someone who's morbidly obese those risk factors are intensified.

I wasn't asked to lose a specific amount of weight but I needed to do everything I could to follow the pre-surgery diet, so that the procedure could be carried out as safely as possible. The recommended instrument of torture was a course of meal-replacement shakes, soups and protein bars, which I had to start on straight away. This proved to be one of the hardest parts of the whole journey for me.

Living on milkshakes for three weeks might not sound so bad, but for me it was awful. I thought they tasted revolting; they were gritty and had no recognisable flavour at all. I tried the soups, but I could never get the powder to completely dissolve. My soup would always have big clumpy balls of powder in it, and I couldn't even force down one mouthful. The protein bars tasted okay but they were super-expensive, so I could only have one of those every few days. The shakes seemed to fill me up more, so it was really a matter of choosing between bad and worse.

Living on milkshakes for three weeks might not sound so bad, but for me it was awful. I thought they tasted revolting; they were gritty and had no recognisable flavour at all.

At the time I was nannying for a family with three kids, and I was looking after them full-time for two weeks while their parents were away. Every night I would cook the children a beautiful dinner, and then I would sit there having my shake instead. It was a huge test of my willpower! Luckily, the family had a dog that needed to be walked for at least an hour a day, and I was so busy with the kids the rest of the time that I didn't have much of a chance to think about food. But it was still horrible.

Going from being obsessed with food to having to survive on shakes alone was a huge change, and I really missed the yummy healthy foods I had been eating. I even missed the sensation of chewing and the satisfaction of having

food in my mouth. But I had my eye on the goal, and I toughed it out as best I could.

CHAPTER 11

UNDER THE KNIFE

5.10.14

I want to share with you all that I have decided to have gastric-sleeve stomach surgery. Please know that this is not a decision I have made lightly.

I have talked to many people who have already had this surgery, and I can say without a shadow of a doubt that this is what I feel is right for me and my journey. Every person I have spoken to about this has had an opinion, and they're entitled to that opinion just as I am entitled to mine. Whatever your views on this, please take a second to put yourself in my shoes and think about what you might consider doing if you had 80 kg to lose and you had to maintain that loss for the rest of your life.

I am beyond excited, and I want to say thank you to everyone who has been so supportive and caring throughout this life-changing decision. In no way do I see this as the 'easy way out'—it will require strength, determination and 100 per cent commitment to my long-term health, but of course this option will aid me in a way that no other can.

My surgery is booked for 28 October, just over three weeks away! I have two nights in hospital following that, and any visits will be much appreciated, to save me from being bored shitless!

Today I start a course of meal-replacement shakes for the weeks leading up to the surgery. The reason for this is to shrink the fat around the organs that are in close proximity to my stomach (mainly my liver). This does mean there will be a lack of food-related posts over the next few months while I am on a liquid and then a puréed diet. However, I'm sure I will still find a way to clog your newsfeed!

I will keep you updated along the way, sharing both my ups and my downs. I can't thank you all enough for your support at this time.

WHEN I WROTE THIS POST I was totally expecting a negative reaction from friends and followers. The few people I'd talked to about my decision to have the surgery had displayed very polarised opinions. Either they were really supportive of me because they understood the position I was in and knew that the surgery would be life-changing, or they didn't know much about it and felt it was cheating or taking an easy way out. Some people assumed it wouldn't be good for me and that I wouldn't be able stick to the massively changed lifestyle I would have to adopt post-surgery.

Everyone had an opinion. I remember one person telling me that I needed to prove I could stick to the changes I was making before I did anything this radical. I felt I had done that already: my new lifestyle had been in place for well over a month and it was going really well and producing results—how could I possibly do more? Did I really have to go on battling my attitude to food for another three months? Six months? How long would it take to 'prove' that I was serious? It already felt as if I had been doing the healthy thing for a lifetime.

So when I wrote that post I felt that I was justifying the decision from my point of view. I was saying, *You are entitled to have your opinion on it, but I'm doing this for me. I'm not going to listen to what anyone else says. It's my life and I know what's best for me.*

28.10.14 (early morning)

IT'S ALL GO! I cannot thank you all enough for your kind messages, phone calls and cards—it means so much to me. Catch you on the flip

side, people! I'll be able to have visitors from 12 today, and I will be on level 4. Just ask for me and they will direct you! xx

28.10.14 (afternoon)

Finally awake and all drugged up. I'm currently an emotional mess and I keep crying for no reason, but really what's new?! Ha ha. The surgeon said all went well and there were no complications so I'm over the moon!!!

THE SURGERY ITSELF WAS REALLY simple, and I was only under anaesthetic for about an hour. But I remember the amount of pain I was in when I woke up: it was horrific and I thought I was going to die! I felt like a bus had run over me. Then the staff got some pain meds into me and I started to come right. Within half an hour I was feeling good and chatting away, so they must have given me the right stuff!

I was overwhelmed by the support I received after the surgery. One of the nurses said she'd never seen such a popular patient, I had so many people popping in to visit! It really showed how many people were behind me, supporting my efforts and wanting to see me succeed. Although the decision to have the surgery had been polarising at first, it was lovely to see so many family members and friends get on board and be happy for me. It also helped to solidify in my mind that I had made the right decision and that this was going to be okay.

It was tough, though—even sipping water hurt in the beginning. I managed to swallow about 200 ml of water that first evening, before moving onto liquid broth (yay!) the next day. Just taking one sip was painful. I knew how important it was to keep hydrated, but man, this was hard work! I guess my stomach had been cut open, so no wonder it hurt, but it did underline for me how different life was going to be from then on. I was no longer going to be able to eat whatever I wanted—even if what I wanted was healthy stuff—because my physical capacity for food was so diminished.

I had been told that I would need a fortnight off work after the surgery, but I am not the kind of person who can do nothing for two weeks, so I knew from the outset that wasn't going to happen!

I was discharged the next day, after just one night in hospital. (Overseas, you usually stay for a couple of nights after this kind of operation, but I was happy enough with one night of rest.) My surgery had been laparoscopic—which means they use cameras to insert their instruments through little holes in your abdomen rather than cutting you right open—and they had pumped me up with gas to make it easier to manoeuvre the instruments. The gas can cause the worst pain post-surgery, because it has to work its way out of your body and it can give you referred pain up in your shoulder. When I moved I would get these really painful twinges right up by my collarbone. I was waiting and waiting for that gas to come out, and finally, five days post-surgery, I did the most massive fart and felt instantly better!

I had been told that I would need a fortnight off work after the surgery, but I am not the kind of person who can do nothing for two weeks, so I knew from the outset that wasn't going to happen! I had planned it so that I would have the surgery on the Thursday, then rest from Friday to Sunday and be back at work on Monday—and that's exactly what I did. At the time I couldn't afford to do anything else. I was nannying and that's not really something you can take 'time off' from, the way you can with an office job. I knew that if I wanted to do this, I had to just power through.



The photo I posted on Facebook when I first woke up after my gastric-sleeve surgery.



My Halloween makeup for the party we hosted the day after my operation.

My plan was obviously against the surgeon's wishes but I didn't confess to him. I just said, 'Sure, I'll take two weeks off' while crossing my fingers behind my back! I took his advice in terms of not lifting anything or trying to exercise, and I was careful about what I was doing, but I just didn't have the luxury of being able to have a proper 'rest'—and nor did I want one.

It wasn't easy and I did get quite tired, but I could manage the day-to-day stuff. It wasn't painful—my stomach felt more like I had eaten some rocks; heavy and dense, but not sore. The laparoscopy incisions were tiny so they didn't hurt, and I could still bend over. But the surgeon told me to imagine that I had a massive wound on the *outside* of my body, because I had one on the inside even though I couldn't see it.

The night I got home from hospital, my flat was hosting a Halloween party, so I had a full-face makeup job to do for that. While the party was going on my friends kept asking me if I needed to sit down but I was like, 'No, I'm fine!' I was walking around socialising, and talking and acting the same as usual. The others all went out afterwards, though, while I took myself off to bed.

While I couldn't eat or drink very much, I felt surprisingly normal. That's just how I am: pretty mentally tough, and I knew that even if I was in pain I could get through it. (Sounds crazy, I know, and it turned out to be not-so-true when it came to my skin-removal surgery—but more on that later!) In some ways it was lucky that I felt so good, because I hadn't considered the alternative. My plan worked out really well.

CHAPTER 12

MY NEW STOMACH

1.11.14 (Week 9)

Weight	Clothing size (top)		Clothing size (bottom)		
148.4 kg	24		26		
Chest	Upper arm	Waist	Hips	Thigh	Bra
125 cm	42 cm	119 cm	158 cm	86 cm	20C

Woke up this morning on week nine of my journey and I have lost 20.6 kg. Everyone's main concern for me is that I am pushing myself too hard only three days after surgery. I went to a drum-and-bass gig last night and had a great time (sober of course) where I'm sure I danced away a few of those lost grams. For me personally, wallowing at home on a Friday night in bed was never going to be something that I would be happy doing. Getting out and enjoying the company of good friends not only gives me some physical exercise but also gets me in a fantastic place mentally.

What I think people need to do is take a step back and have SOME faith in me. I am and never will be someone who enjoys a 'quiet' night in —socialising is my drug of choice and it keeps me sane. Also remember that I am not stupid or careless: I did not spend \$20,000 on this

operation to put it in any sort of jeopardy and I want to and WILL get the best results possible.

Many people who have this operation take two weeks off work, but I took two days. I truly believe that what the mind sets itself to, it will achieve. They say 99 per cent of gastric-sleeve patients go through a regret period shortly after the surgery, where they wonder why on earth they put themselves through this—I am not letting that happen to me. I'm taking each day as it comes and making the absolute most of it!

So with that all said, here is 20 kg in butter . . . that I will never be seeing back on this body!

THE WEIRDEST THING AFTER THE surgery was that I had no appetite at all. I still had my mental hunger—thinking I should eat, or wanting to eat—but I wasn't getting that message from my gut. There was no sensation of emptiness. I had to remind myself that it was 12 o'clock and that I'd better eat some lunch. This was a massive change for me, considering my life had revolved around food for so long.

The biggest challenge was ensuring I was adequately hydrated: I had to keep sip-sip-sipping all day long to make sure I was getting plenty of fluid on board. I carried a drink bottle with me everywhere and had to remind myself to take a swig every so often—any more than a swig was too much; it was physically impossible for me to drink even half a glass of water in one go.

And strangely, despite the fact I was eating so much less—just a tablespoon full of soft or puréed food at a time—my energy levels weren't too bad. You might expect to feel weak or get that low-blood-sugar, headachy, dizzy feeling when you're eating so little, but I only had a couple of spells like that. I remember working with one makeup client not long after the surgery and having to sit down a lot; I struggled through the session then just went home and collapsed. But by and large I felt pretty good.

That's what truly made me realise that our bodies don't need to be given so much food all the time! They don't require very much at all to survive, and not much on top of that to thrive. It's no wonder the Western world has such a problem with obesity, when most people eat far, far more than their bodies need.

We eat because we're used to it, and because it's socially acceptable to

continually overeat, but our bodies just don't require the amount we think they do. Obviously you need to be sensible about this and not set out to starve yourself, but it is interesting to take a step back and think about *how much* you are eating, not just *what* you are eating. Even when I had recovered a little from the surgery and was able to resume workouts at the gym, I had plenty of energy and never found myself feeling hungry or dizzy, despite the fact that I still wasn't able to eat much.

Post-surgery my stomach had a capacity of around 80–120 ml (5–7 tablespoons) compared to the 1-litre capacity of a normal adult stomach, or the 2-litre capacity that my pre-surgery tummy had stretched to. About a week after the surgery I was running late for work so I grabbed a mini juice from Tank, which is about 300 ml. I remember struggling to get through even a third of it! The little girl I was nannying finished it off for me.

I'm not a soup girl at all, and puréeing my food just made me want to puke, so I was keen to get back on to regular foods as soon as possible.

A couple of times before the surgery I had seen a dietician, who gave me some idea of the sorts of foods I would be eating afterwards. She said I would be on a liquid/puréed diet for at least three weeks, but I found that after one week I was able to have a little taste of some actual food: things like a soft-boiled egg (I could only tolerate one mouthful, but still). I'm not a soup girl at all, and puréeing my food just made me want to puke, so I was keen to get back on to regular foods as soon as possible.

But there were some things my body refused to accept. A couple of weeks after the surgery I decided to be a bit naughty and have a bite—just a *bite*—of a beautiful whitebait fritter at the La Cigale French market, where I had taken the kids I was nannying. Big mistake! It came back up as fast as it went down—I had to find a handy bush to throw up in—and afterwards I felt disgusting for hours. It kind of served me right for trying solid food too soon, but I certainly learned my lesson!

Not being able to tolerate even a tiny bit of certain foods was strange. Apparently everyone is different, but I soon learned that my system couldn't handle anything oily or fatty. After the whitebait incident I did keep trying different foods, but I made sure I did it in the privacy of my own home, with

my own loo handy if I needed to throw up! I preferred to cook at home so I knew exactly how my food had been prepared and what was in it, including what oil it had been fried in. These days I can tolerate oil in small quantities, but initially I had to be very careful to avoid it: I would bake chicken in the oven rather than frying it, for example. Slowly I was able to expand my repertoire, through trial and error, but my diet was pretty plain for a while there.

It was a couple of months before my appetite really came back and I actually felt hungry, as opposed to knowing that I should eat. I guess my tummy was repairing itself and healing during those months; it was too busy, and tender, to send me a hunger message. Eating wasn't a very pleasant experience—it still felt a bit uncomfortable and sometimes even sore—so obviously my brain wasn't going to give me the message to do it again and again. Interesting how the body works!

Given that so much of my day had revolved around food—thinking about it, planning it, preparing it, eating it—there was a bit of a hole in my life now that I couldn't eat much. I had more time, for starters. If I cooked one piece of chicken it would take me a couple of days to eat it! I had done heaps of meal preparation and freezing in advance of the surgery, but I ended up having to throw a lot of that food away, because I just didn't feel like eating it. I cut back on the pre-preparing and bulk cooking, choosing instead to see what I felt like making every couple of days. It also saved me quite a bit of money!

ONE OF THE WEIRD SIDE EFFECTS of weight-loss surgery is hair loss. It's officially called telogen effluvium, and has to do with the normal hair-growth cycle. About 90 per cent of your hair is in a growth phase at any one time, with 5–15 per cent of it in a 'resting' phase before being shed (this phase is called telogen). When you have major surgery, the stress and hormonal changes can 'shock' more of your hair into the resting phase, and when the resting hairs are shed and new hair starts to grow (1–6 months later) you might find you lose more than usual. It's the same thing that can happen to women after they give birth. The good news is, the hair does grow back, but there can be a bit of a lag between the falling out and the arrival of the new hair.

After weight-loss surgery, when you're eating less, your body is also busy

making sure that the nutrients you do consume are directed towards running the critical functions of your body. Hair, skin and nails are all non-essentials, and tend to suffer. Your nails become weak, your skin goes all dry and your hair falls out.

Fear of losing my hair was one of the few things that worried me about the surgery. My hair had always been beautiful—even when I was really overweight I had gorgeous, long hair, and I was very proud of it. In some ways it was a security blanket for me, and the idea of it falling out and leaving me ‘exposed’ to the world was terrifying. I had to tell myself that my health was more important, and that fear of losing a bit of hair was a stupid reason not to have the surgery. I mean, what would you choose? To be dangerously obese and have great hair, or to have a chance at major weight loss and be a baldy for a bit?

Fear of losing my hair was one of the few things that worried me about the surgery. My hair had always been beautiful—even when I was really overweight I had gorgeous, long hair, and I was very proud of it.

The hair loss started not long after the surgery for me. Every time I touched my hair or ran my fingers through it I’d get a handful. When I brushed it, hair would fall out in hunks. The bathroom floor was always covered with it; the drain was clogged after I showered. It was quite scary, but Mum would always try to cheer me up by telling me I had plenty of it to lose—at least I hadn’t gone into this with thin hair! That was a good reality check.

It went on for about a year post-op, and my hair thinned out to about half its usual volume. But then, as predicted, it started to grow back in. My hairdresser pointed it out to me: all these downy baby hairs coming through. I had noticed them, but I was colouring my hair super-blonde at the time and had assumed they were caused by bleached bits snapping off! Now my hair is back to its former glory, thankfully.

On the subject of hair, people often ask me what my natural colour is, because it has changed a bit over the past few years. I am naturally blonde, but when I started my weight-loss journey my hair was dark. Then I decided to go lighter, then back to very blonde.

I first went dark when I was with my ex-boyfriend and he hated it, so while we were together I kept it dark as a bit of a middle-finger to him—it was one thing I had control over. By the time I reached my goal weight, not only was it blonde again but I had cut most of it off as well!

Since then I have continued changing it up from time to time—my hairdresser gave me balayage (graduated highlights) at one stage, and I've put rinses through it to go darker again. At the moment I'm brunette, but it's all temporary colour, so if I want to go back to blonde again I can—and it won't be the nightmare it was when I used permanent dark dye.

CHAPTER 13

CHANGES

8.11.14 (Week 10)

Weight	Clothing size (top)		Clothing size (bottom)		
143.7 kg	22		26		
Chest	Upper arm	Waist	Hips	Thigh	Bra
120 cm	42 cm	114 cm	150 cm	86 cm	20C

It's safe to say the surgery is working and at a pretty dramatic rate. I have now lost 25.3 kg and 16 cm from around my waist! And in the 12 days since the surgery I have lost 7.3 kg. I have only felt 'hunger' once, and I waited an hour and it went away on its own while I was focusing on other things. In those 12 days I have eaten the equivalent of ONE of my normal (pre-surgery) sized meals.

I've been feeling great, with lots of energy, but yesterday I did my first workout with my personal trainer Nicole Alyce, and I really felt the lack of food hit me. Nicole is wonderful and she's designed a full workout around my post-surgery limitations, which include no heavy lifting for three weeks. We did boxing, squats, lunges and some arm work. She smashed me in the best way, and walking today is a struggle—great sign!

So, my aim from today onwards is to ensure I am eating three times a

day with protein-rich foods, so my body has something to run on.



A training session with Nicole Alyce in March 2015. I hoisted her up on my shoulders for this photo because she weighed 65 kg—exactly how much I had lost at that point!



Appearing on TV3's *The Café* with Nicole (right) in April 2016. The show's host Mel Homer is between us.

I WAS ASTONISHED BY HOW fast I was losing weight. Obviously it was largely because I was eating such a small amount, but even so it was impressive.

Protein foods became my big focus. The surgeon and the dietician had really pushed the fact that eating protein needed to be my number-one priority. Vegetables could come second and carbs last—and this was going to be my diet from now on. I learned that your body needs protein to repair and fuel itself. It can survive without everything else, but it has to have those basic protein building blocks to function.

So this meant a bit of a turnaround in my diet. Ricotta cheese on crackers, high-protein yoghurt, eggs, meaty soups, salmon, fish, small pieces of chicken—any way I could get protein in, I did. I spent a lot of time googling the most protein-rich foods, so I could maximise protein despite only being able to eat tiny amounts.

As well as changing what I ate, I was dealing with my food addiction and the habits I had built up over so many years. The dietician wanted me to get into a new pattern of having three decent meals a day (although ‘decent’ at this stage was still only a few tablespoons!) and not constantly snacking. However, I did find that with the amount of exercise I was doing—probably more than most bariatric patients—I needed to throw in a few snacks here and there to give me enough energy. In consultation with my surgeon, I settled on having five small meals a day, and I was very aware that I couldn’t snack in-between those meals.

The minute I recognised that ‘full’ feeling I had to stop eating, and not try to fit in a little bit more. Not even one bite!

The good thing was that my body would tell me quite clearly when I’d had enough. When my stomach was at full stretch I could eat and eat without really noticing, but those days were gone. The feeling I used to get after three or four Big Macs (I know, I know!), would show up now after eating a very small portion of food. And the minute I recognised that ‘full’ feeling I had to stop eating, and not try to fit in a little bit more. Not even one bite!

One of the things I rewarded myself with at this stage was my first bikini. It was high-waisted and not too revealing, and I felt amazing in it. I was still more than 55 kg away from my goal weight, but that didn't mean I couldn't love my body for what it was right then—a work in progress.

As it turned out I didn't think this through too well: by the time summer rolled around I had lost so much more weight that the bikini was gaping on me and half falling off. But at the time it was a milestone I wanted to celebrate, and I'm really glad I did. It was so liberating to put that bikini on and feel good in it.

I didn't really notice that my social-media reach was creeping up, but over this time more and more people were starting to follow me, and to comment on my posts. People would ask me where various accessories or items of clothing had come from, and instead of just answering in the comments I would tag the various stores and suppliers. I love clothing and fashion, and sharing this side of me was fun. I didn't start doing it with any commercial motive; it was like having a chat with a friend who might say, 'Ooh, I like your bag!' It felt like a natural thing for me to be doing—at this stage I never imagined that my life and my story would become my business. The whole thing was growing so slowly that it seemed very organic.

ANOTHER IMPORTANT CHANGE THAT I made in my life at this time was moving into an apartment with my very good friend Jess. It was one of the best things I could have done. Jess is a very healthy person with a holistic philosophy—a vegetarian and yoga practitioner—and living with her was just what I needed at this stage of my journey. She had my back 100 per cent, and supported me the whole way.

Living with someone who had such healthy habits was inspiring. Jess would encourage me to go out and exercise, and she'd make us yummy raw treats for those nights when we were sitting on the couch at home. Everything we did together was health-based. Seeing someone living their life that way and enjoying it so much—eating well and exercising wasn't *hard* for her, she just lived it—had a hugely positive influence on me.



Having a laugh with Jess at City Works Depot in February 2018.

It was refreshing, especially after the last place I had been living. The friend I was sharing with there tended to bring out the worst in me, and I in her! We'd egg one another on to eat bad food and veg out on the couch, or to pop out to the dairy or the drive-through or whatever—she'd offer to pay if I drove, and vice versa.

When I first started out on my weight-loss journey I was meeting lots of different guys, but it seemed like a good idea to back off from all of that and take some time out just for me.

In terms of looking after our health, we weren't that good for one another, whereas living with Jess was exactly the opposite. I like to think that I had a positive influence on Jess, too. She was just coming out of a long relationship so she was quite sheltered socially, and I was able to take her out with me, introduce her to new people and bring out her social side. So it was a win-win situation in which we were both benefitting, but I know I can't ever thank Jess enough for the positive influence she had on me at this critical time.

I wasn't seeing anyone at this stage. When I first started out on my weight-loss journey I was meeting lots of different guys, but it seemed like a good idea to back off from all of that and take some time out just for me. I felt that I had to focus purely on myself: I didn't want anyone else's input, positive or negative, and I needed to concentrate on my goals without trying to keep someone else happy as well. Maybe it was selfish, but I knew that I would get the best results if I was single-minded (literally). I cut ties with all the guys I had been flirting with or texting, and decided to just be me for a while.

Not that I wasn't getting plenty of male attention! Guys who wouldn't have looked twice at me in the past were messaging me and asking me out. I just had to say to them all, 'Thanks, but no thanks.' I even got messages saying things like, 'I wouldn't have been interested in you before because you were so big, but you look great now.' I mean, who would think that would work?! It really brought home to me how many people in our society are focused on looks and nothing else, and made me realise that when I did start seeing someone again, I wanted it to be completely genuine. I wanted someone who would care about me as a person, not about my size.

CHAPTER 14

OCEAN SWIMMER

THE FIRST BIG FITNESS GOAL I set myself was doing the Harbour Crossing ocean swim: 2.9 km across Auckland’s inner Waitemata Harbour from Bayswater to the Viaduct. I remembered how much I used to love swimming and was keen to get back into it, so I thought I should set myself a goal that was really going to challenge me. I wanted to be pushed out of my comfort zone, but I didn’t realise when I signed up that I would be pushed quite so far!

I had just over two months to prepare, and at that time (not long before my surgery) I hadn’t been swimming for over a year. My first swim was at the Onehunga pool complex. I managed to do 3 km—120 laps—but it took me an hour and 10 minutes! I knew that, ideally, I would have to be able to swim about 3.5 km to allow for ocean current, and to allow for the fact that I wouldn’t be pushing off the pool walls every 25 m. So I had a wee way to go.

The great thing about swimming was that it didn’t seem like hard work—I loved the feeling of being back in the pool and the way my body felt when it was doing something useful. I trained by myself, which made a change from my more social gym sessions. I didn’t know anyone else who was into swimming and, besides, it’s a good thing to do solo—you can’t talk while you’re swimming anyway! Even if you have the support of a friend to get down there, once you’re in the pool you’re on your own. It became my space where I could really enjoy having time to myself.

Unlike running, where you have to think about where you're going and adjust your stride for corners and slopes, swimming is repetitive and automatic in a good way. There's nothing to look at or distract you. You can become one with your own thoughts. When I'm swimming I really mellow out, and all the things that are running around my head—got to do this, then got to do that, need to be here—fade away and I can just focus on myself.

Unlike running, where you have to think about where you're going and adjust your stride for corners and slopes, swimming is repetitive and automatic in a good way.

Swimming became my time to contemplate my journey, to think about where I was going and where I was coming from, and to reassess other things, too: friendships, relationships, my wider life. Even though I was exercising, for me it was a relaxed time when I could put things in perspective and think about what I wanted to make a priority.

I started off swimming at the Onehunga complex because it has an indoor pool, then I moved to the outdoor Parnell Baths once they opened for the summer season. I needed to get a feel for swimming outside and in salt water.

10.11.14

First swim today since my surgery 13 days ago. Made the plunge from the heated indoor pool at Onehunga to the freezing-cold saltwater pool at the Parnell Baths. It's only 27 days until the Harbour Crossing! Smashed out 3 km in just over an hour.

The benefits of this pool are that it's salt water and it's outside, so it should replicate the conditions that I will be experiencing on the day better. Also it is 60 m long, so I'm not pushing off the wall nearly as often. The cons are that my mouth now tastes like the Dead Sea and my nipples may be permanently erect.

I FELT LIKE I HAD PREPARED really well, but when I lined up on the

morning of the race I glanced around me and everybody looked like a swimmer—except me. I was surrounded by fit bodies in slick, tight-fitting wetsuits. I didn't look like a fish out of water, I looked like a whale. Anyone observing this crowd and then spotting me would think, *This girl isn't going to make it past the start line, let alone swim across the harbour.* But I knew I could do it, and I was determined to succeed.

However, there was one big flaw in my plan: I'd never trained in the ocean. The Parnell Baths are saltwater—that's close enough, isn't it? Big fat no. I knew in my head that for every stroke you take in a nice, calm pool you need to take three or four in the ocean, but I had no idea that it would be so hard.

Before the race even started we had to swim out to the start line, and that alone was terrifying. I was thinking, *How am I going to do this?* The water felt really cold and my heart was racing. When you first put your face in cold water, your body doesn't like it and your gasp reflex kicks in, which can make you feel like you're going to hyperventilate. Fortunately, I got that under control during the few minutes it took to get out to the start line. I was ready to race.

I knew in my head that for every stroke you take in a nice, calm pool you need to take three or four in the ocean, but I had no idea that it would be so hard.

The first few hundred metres were the worst, as we swam out to the first turning buoy. There were people thrashing all around me and I was getting kicked in the head. And as we came around the end of the Bayswater marina into the harbour proper, the ocean started getting me. Every time I went to breathe, I got a mouthful of salt water and I would choke on it. I felt like I was dying! I had to work really hard to stay focused, reminding myself that I wasn't going to drown and that I just had to keep going. All I could think was, *I don't think I trained enough for this.* I knew I could cover the distance in a pool, but was I going to be able to make it all the way over a choppy, swimmer-infested harbour?

There were definitely moments when I wanted to give up; to tread water, raise my hand and wait to be rescued. But for me, the embarrassment of being pulled out of the water, and of failing so publicly, was infinitely more

painful to contemplate than the thought of carrying on. I just kept thinking, *I don't want to be the one person who doesn't make the buoys in time and has to be physically removed from the course because I'm too slow, too fat, too unfit to be doing this. That can be someone else, but it cannot be me.*

As it turned out, I was miles ahead of the swimmers struggling down the back—nowhere near the cut-off time. Afterwards, I couldn't understand why I had been so afraid. I recorded a really good time: 1 hour, 11 minutes and 8 seconds. Not quite as fast as I'd hoped, but you've got to start somewhere, eh? I was about mid-fleet, not lagging or last, and they certainly didn't have to pull me out of the water and rescue me halfway across! I was so proud of myself—even at my size (I was around 134 kg by this stage) I had achieved my goal and done something that a lot of people who were skinnier than me couldn't have done.

Successes like this along the way helped keep me motivated and focused on my overall goal. I could see that what I was doing was working—I was losing weight, I was getting fitter. If I kept this up, I was going to make it.

Those intermediate goals were important in another way, too. If I thought too hard about my big goal, it almost seemed impossible to lose so much weight. Sometimes it helped to take my focus *off* the main prize and onto those in-between goals, whether they be about weight, size, fitness or even something simple like fitting into a pair of jeans. I knew I would reach my ultimate goal in time, but those smaller targets kept me on track and gave me a day-to-day purpose. When it came to my training for the ocean swim, I could say to myself, *If you don't go for a swim today it's going to be ten times harder to do the event, so get your arse into those togs and get in the water!*

CHAPTER 15

HAPPY BIRTHDAY TO ME!

6.12.14 (Week 15)

Weight	Clothing size (top)		Clothing size (bottom)		
133.9 kg	20		24		
Chest	Upper arm	Waist	Hips	Thigh	Bra
116 cm	41 cm	111 cm	148 cm	81 cm	20C

AS THE YEAR CAME TO a close I was on a big high. My weight loss was going well, I was getting stronger and fitter all the time and, best of all, I was feeling so healthy. I had so much more energy to get out there and do the things I enjoyed with my friends without always feeling tired, sweaty and uncomfortable. If this was what losing weight and getting fit was about, I just wished I'd done it years earlier!

At the start of December I went to Sydney for a weekend for the music festival Stereosonic, where I danced off a few more kilos! The whole trip was amazing, not only because I loved the music and was able to dance the night away without getting sweaty and exhausted, but also because the plane trip was so much easier. I mentioned before how horrible flying was for me when

I was massive—I was still 134 kg when I went to Sydney, but now I could get the seatbelt on and even feel reasonably comfortable for the duration of the flight.

By this point a typical patient would have lost 13–15 kg, and I had shed 18 kg.

I had a follow-up appointment with my dietician in early December, five weeks after surgery, and she was very pleased with the progress I was making. By this point a typical patient would have lost 13–15 kg, and I had shed 18 kg. She put my success down to the amount of exercise I was doing, but warned me that I would need to replace lost fluids—I should be trying to drink at least 2 litres of water a day, rather than the 1.5 litres I was currently having. She also told me that I should be managing an ‘egg-sized’ portion of food per meal. I was only able to eat about three-quarters of that at the time, but she said if I kept trying I should see improvement.

19.12.14 (Week 17)

Weight	Clothing size (top)		Clothing size (bottom)		
129 kg	20		24		
Chest	Upper arm	Waist	Hips	Thigh	Bra
115 cm	41 cm	110 cm	147 cm	80 cm	20C

This is the best early birthday present I could have asked for—I achieved my goal of losing 40 kg by my birthday! Could not be happier. I can’t even express this feeling in words and it’s FRIDAY, double whammy!!

20.12.14

HAPPY BIRTHDAY TO ME! Today I turn 24, another year older, another year (not so) wiser, but so much accomplished in just 365 days. It’s now been 17 weeks (more than 4 months!) since I began my journey and I have lost 40 kg!!!! Tonight I’m celebrating with my amazing

friends and family. I will be eating cake and drinking champagne and I won't even feel the slightest bit guilty about it.

I HAD THE MOST AMAZING birthday that year. I do love to have a party, so I put on a bit of shindig at my aunty's house . . . you know, just invited about 150 friends and family, hired a marquee, put on plenty of great food and of course a few drinks!

What I didn't know was that, without telling me, my friends had rallied together and raised as much money as they could to help me pay off the loan I had taken out for my surgery. They made me a huge novelty cheque and presented it to me at the party! It was about \$1300, and it was a really big boost—not only to my finances, but to my spirits—knowing how many people cared about me and this journey of mine. I'd had no idea they were planning it, but I received loads of comments about how proud people were of me. It was just overwhelming.



Facebook snaps from my 24th birthday (top) and from Christmas 2014, getting ready for the Boxing Day Races.

I couldn't stop crying, which was a shame because it ruined my beautiful birthday makeup! I felt so special and so loved. It wasn't so much the money—it was knowing that all these people wanted me to succeed, and it gave me

such an awesome feeling. I didn't have much cake, but I did manage a tiny bit of champagne!

CHRISTMAS THAT YEAR WAS AMAZING, too, with a group of about 30 family members getting together for a big meal. In the past Christmas Day has revolved around food for me, so it was kind of strange having a day where what I could eat wasn't my biggest focus.

I wasn't fazed, though. I had a bit of ham and some fruit for breakfast, a yummy salad at lunch and something light for dinner, and it was fine. It was nice to be able to concentrate on being with family and enjoying good times with them, rather than on my battle with food.

Then it was time for fun: I was heading down to Rhythm and Vines near Gisborne for a few days of music and dancing to welcome in the new year. I have always been a fan of festivals and concerts but, once again, it made such a difference having plenty of energy—not only to party but also to wander around the festival site and do the things my friends were doing. This time around I was able to join in with everything, including jumping off Tolaga Bay Wharf. I was shit-scared about that, but really stoked with myself for doing it! It wouldn't have happened when I was at my heaviest.

It had been a massive year and, while I was only four months into my journey to health, I had already come so far. I didn't know what the new year was going to hold for me, but I was excited about it. I still had eight months to reach my goal weight, and I had lots of other exciting dreams and plans. I just couldn't wait to get on with it.

31.12.14

At the start of this year my mum called me and said, 'It's the year of the horse, your Chinese zodiac sign. This will be your year, Simone.' I took this information in and then brushed it off, like everything else your parents tell you, ha ha.

Well, 365 days later I cannot comprehend how far I have come in the space of one year. I have turned my hair and makeup skills into a flourishing and successful small business with a well-known name for itself. I have moved into my dream apartment right in the city with one

of my best friends. I have paid off a brand-new car, got rid of all my debt and finally built up some savings, I have travelled and experienced so many new things, and met and connected with too many incredible people to even begin to count.

Finally, and most importantly, I have transformed my life in terms of my health. I have undergone gastric sleeve surgery and lost 45 kg. But, not only have I had the surgery, I have also completely transformed the way I think about food and exercise. I am the healthiest I have been in about 8 years! I am truly content, happy, proud, and determined to achieve even more in 2015.

I want to say a huge thank you to all the people who are supporting me through this page, 1700 of you now! I started this purely to keep myself accountable for my actions, and it has turned into far more than I could ever have hoped for. You all keep me so motivated to better myself each and every day.

Happy New Year to you all, and I hope you are celebrating with loved ones and friends! And to Mum: 'You were right.'

CHAPTER 16

ALWAYS MOVING

31.1.15 (Week 23)

Weight	Clothing size (top)		Clothing size (bottom)		
116.75 kg	18		22		
Chest	Upper arm	Waist	Hips	Thigh	Bra
107 cm	38 cm	99 cm	133 cm	75 cm	18D

I WAS SO EXCITED THAT it was the start of a new year, because this was going to be the year I would reach my goal weight. Everything was going so well, I was loving my new lifestyle, and I was just over halfway there.

One of the first things I did in the new year was to join the Les Mills gym in Auckland city. If you'd asked me a year earlier if I'd belong to even one gym, let alone two, I would have thought you were crazy, but here I was! My personal trainer, Nicole, had got a job at Les Mills and I had been thinking about joining there for a while, because of the awesome range of group fitness classes they have available. I had a little bit of time left on my City Fitness membership so I used that up, and then Les Mills became my main

gym.

I've always loved BodyPump class—that's still my go-to—and the core-strength class CXWorx is great, too. It's only 30 minutes and it really strengthens your abdominals and tightens your tummy. I'm also a fan of BodyStep, and I now enjoy the martial-arts-style class BodyCombat, although it took me a bit longer to warm to that one.

I found I was super-motivated—I'd put myself right at the front of the class, where I knew there were 80 or so people watching me from behind, so I'd be keen to avoid making a mistake or slacking off.

Exercising in a group environment is heaps of fun, especially when there's great music, and I found that it gave me extra motivation to complete my workouts. When I was just doing weights I sometimes struggled to get myself to the gym; I had to work out which exercises I was going to do, how many sets, at what weight and so on. But if I went to a group fitness class, I didn't have to think about any of that.

I found I was super-motivated—I'd put myself right at the front of the class, where I knew there were 80 or so people watching me from behind, so I'd be keen to avoid making a mistake or slacking off. I didn't want to be that one person in the front going the wrong way or using the wrong arm! The instructors are really demanding, and I love that—they would push me above and beyond what I would have done if I was working out solo. Even if I felt like I was going to drop dead, I'd keep going—I'd never stop or walk out or take it easy on myself. I'd go in there, smash out a class, and before I knew it the hour would be up and I'd had a really good workout. All I had to do was show up—everything else was done for me.

By this stage of my journey I was getting used to exercising in public, but at first it was really difficult. When I weighed 160 kg there was no way I wanted to walk into a BodyPump class at Les Mills and plonk myself down up the front! City Fitness was a good place to start, because it was a lot more low-key and not pretentious at all. There were people of all shapes and sizes there, from bodybuilders to massively obese people like myself, so I didn't feel too intimidated turning up and putting myself on show.

Of course, there were still people who looked at me funny when they saw

me at the gym. I used to worry that they were judging me, but then I told myself, *Maybe they're just admiring the fact that I'm here and I'm trying to get fit!* I found out pretty quickly that the buzz I got from a good workout was worth having to deal with any nervousness beforehand or funny looks. I just stopped worrying about what other people were thinking and did it for me. It didn't matter about anyone else—I was at the gym doing my thing and it was nobody's business but mine.

Once I found my feet, I was keen to give any sport or physical exercise a go, just like I had been when I was a kid. Some classes and activities I loved, and some just didn't gel with me—and that's fine. Mixing it up and keeping exercise interesting and fun is my priority.

ONE OF THE BEST THINGS about losing weight and getting fit was that my love of sports came back to me. For so many years it wasn't physically possible for me to run up and down a basketball court or play a water polo match, and it was such a great feeling to be able to return to the games I had enjoyed as an active child. I quickly discovered that my skills were pretty rusty in most of these sports, but it was still heaps of fun and a good way to socialise and keep fit at the same time.

I joined a basketball team first, with a bunch of other girls who ran rings around me! All I was useful for was my height, which meant I could get the rebounds when they missed their goals. But if that was my role, I was happy, and I loved every minute. Fortunately my skills did improve over time, but it's fair to say they're never going to sign me for the NBA!

I also put a post on my Facebook page asking if anyone had a social sports team that needed members, and one of my followers messaged me about her netball team. I'm still playing for that team now, more than two and a half years later. We've got such a fun group of girls! There are six of us who are original members, and we socialise together all the time.

When I play netball now it doesn't even feel like exercise—it's a chance to catch up with a bunch of friends and run around for 45 minutes while having a good time. I'm exhausted at the end but I don't notice it during the game, I'm having too much fun. That particular team plays outdoor netball, but I belong to an indoor team now as well.

For someone who had been doing absolutely zero physical

exercise for a long time, I now had a full fitness calendar.

It was a buzz getting back into water polo, too. I had loved it so much when I was younger, and hated having to give it up. I had recently reconnected with a girl from my school whose water polo team played out at Sacred Heart in Glendowie, so I joined up and played with them for about 18 months. It was a bit of a trek out there for a 20-minute game, but I did relish being back in the pool competing.

For someone who had been doing absolutely zero physical exercise for a long time, I now had a full fitness calendar. Everything started adding up, and not just physically. I had two gym memberships, and every week I was playing three games of netball, a basketball game and a water polo game. All of the games were \$10 a pop, and if I added a boot-camp session at the park that was another \$10. So I was spending about \$100 per week just on gym memberships and sports! I had to cut back a bit for the sake of my wallet.

Despite the expense, being able to play sport again was a huge boost for me. My body—a liability for so long—felt useful again. It had a purpose. And being out there running around felt so normal and natural. When I was at my biggest, I remember watching my girlfriends heading off to play sport in the evenings and thinking, *How do they do it? How do they have the energy?* But now I understood! It really made sense to me again, how good it felt to get out there and get moving.

CHAPTER 17

KEEPING IT REAL

21.2.15 (Week 26)

Weight	Clothing size (top)		Clothing size (bottom)		
112.75 kg	16		22		
Chest	Upper arm	Waist	Hips	Thigh	Bra
105 cm	38 cm	96 cm	130 cm	75 cm	18C

AS A WAY TO REMIND MYSELF of the progress I was making, I started taking a new photo and marrying it up with a ‘before’ photo on my Facebook feed about once a month. Even though I could see the numbers going down when I weighed and measured myself each week, when I looked in the mirror I couldn’t really see the changes. Comparing the photos helped me to notice the details, whether it was my face slimming down or my thighs getting that little bit smaller or whatever. While my weight loss seemed dramatic to people who didn’t see me from day to day, it just kind of crept up on me.

It’s funny, even today, when I look in the mirror I still see the same person I have always seen. Some days all I can see is myself at 169 kg, especially if I’ve been eating badly or I’ve missed a workout. On those days, when I’m

feeling a bit low, I practise positive self-talk and build myself up. I remind myself how far I've come, and that I'm never going back there.

It's a struggle many of us share: to maintain a healthy, positive self-image. Even though I now have what many people would consider to be a great body, and I'm healthy and fit, I still wrestle with it myself.

29.1.15

So many of you incredible people comment on my photos with things like 'You're perfect' and 'You look flawless'. As lovely as this is, and as amazing as it makes me feel, I wanted to do a post to say I'm 100 per cent NOT perfect or flawless. I know how easy it is to create this illusion through social media!

As a woman, I tend to post photos when I have a full face of makeup, my hair's done and I'm heading out in a nice outfit—because that's when I feel most confident, sexy and beautiful. But this is only how I look for very small snippets of my week!

I'm lucky that I'm also very comfortable in a bare face and some old clothes. For 95 per cent of my week I wear absolutely no makeup, but photos of me in this state never get put on social media.

I have freckles, moles, redness, bags under my eyes, blemishes, uneven brows, lashes so blonde they look non-existent . . . and I'm okay with this. In fact, I love it because it all adds up to what makes me, well, me. Plus, makeup hides all sins!

So, I'm embracing my perfect imperfections in this photo with no filter. I tried to take it in the most natural light possible, while I've got no makeup on and naturally dried hair (I do get my brows dyed because I'm a natural blonde, and I couldn't take the dye off obviously, but that's the only unnatural part!).



The photo I uploaded to Facebook alongside the post above. Keeping it real!



Another pair of photos I shared on social media in May 2017, highlighting the difference between Instagram and real life.

AS I GAINED MORE FOLLOWERS on social media, I felt that it was really important to go on being ‘real’ and showing people what my life was actually like, rather than sugarcoating it. We all like to post our most flattering photos, and it’s fun to play with filters and lighting, but I also believe in keeping it real. In lots of my photos I am glammed up, especially if I’m going to a special event, but that’s not my day-to-day reality. The vast majority of the time I’m just cruising around with a bare face and regular clothes, being me.

I think it’s important to remind everyone that what you see on social media is only a little highlight reel of what people’s lives are like. Social media in general doesn’t show what’s going on behind the scenes, and it’s often not completely honest and truthful. Sharing my low points and the days when I feel down or don’t look my best is something I feel strongly about, because it shows people that I’m just like them.

We’re all the same: we have good and bad days; we get dressed up; we lie around the house in our trackies. When you see images of glamorous, beautiful women online it’s easy to assume that they look like that 24/7, and it makes you feel a bit shit about yourself because you don’t look like that 100 per cent of the time (or any of the time!). So I like to remind people that we’re all human, and while I love doing makeup and hair and getting all glammed up, that’s not my everyday.

ONE OF THE QUESTIONS I often get asked on social media is where do I get all my clothes? It’s a good one—how can I afford to have so many new outfits all the time? As more and more people were liking and following my page, and I was posting more frequently, this was a question that kept coming up.

Well, I’ve got to tell you it’s not because I’ve got a huge limit on my credit card. What I do is something anyone can do—it takes a bit of time and organising, but it’s so worth it, especially if you want to have fab new outfits without going completely bankrupt!

Basically I have a ‘wardrobe’ page on Facebook, which is a closed group that members have to be invited to. I buy clothes and wear them once, then sell them to someone else in the group. I might lose \$5 or \$10 on the purchase, but it means I can then go out and buy something else. (Sometimes I wear them twice, but not often, and some pieces that I really love I do

keep.) This gives me an ever-revolving wardrobe.



Putting looks together is my thing. Fashion, hair, makeup, accessories—I love them all. These outfits are from Stereosonic in December 2015 (top) and the Northern Bass music festival two years later.

For me, fashion is something I simply adore, and I find that world exciting and fun. It's not that I feel I can't be seen in something twice—I'm not the Queen!—the truth is that I just love to create new looks. I love matching colours and coming up with something complementary and cool. I always play with every aspect of a look, working out my whole outfit from head to toe, including makeup, accessories and shoes. I don't necessarily aim to be perfectly on-trend, either; I like creating a new vibe or something that's a bit different.

I have to be a bit cut-throat—even when I really like something I try not to hang on to it, because you can fall into the trap of keeping stuff you don't really wear, and by the time you want to sell the piece it's gone out of fashion.

A lot of my stuff I buy online, through retailers like ASOS, Showpo, Charlotte Lane or PIA Boutique. I have to be a bit cut-throat—even when I really like something I try not to hang on to it, because you can fall into the trap of keeping stuff you don't really wear, and by the time you want to sell the piece it's gone out of fashion or it's not worth anything. I sell it while it's still the hot new thing, and the buyer is stoked because she's getting something almost brand new for cheaper than retail price, and sometimes the piece might even be sold out in the shops. So it's a win-win situation.

People sometimes say that they get ideas from the things I wear, but I'd like them to know that I also find inspiration online, from other girls' Instagram or Facebook pages. I'll see a piece and wonder how I could recreate a similar look or make it my own. And I hope I have that effect on my followers, too!

CHAPTER 18

CELEBRATING THE LITTLE VICTORIES

6.1.15

First pair of pants I have owned since I was 15!!!! Now that's an achievement, getting this arse into a pair of pants!

5.3.15

I'm about to fly out to Melbourne for the weekend for Future Music and to visit some friends who I haven't seen in ages. I am so excited! Here is my plane attire. Yes, I am wearing jeans, and they are my very first pair—such a cool feeling. Today I can sit in an aeroplane seat with room either side of me, room in front of my knees and a belt that I need to tighten!!! I am ecstatic! This feeling can't be beaten . . . look what I have achieved!

23.6.15

For as long as I can remember, since at least the age of 14, I have worn jackets/cardigans every time I go out in public as I've never liked my arms. It's such a liberating feeling putting on a dress and not feeling the need to wear a jacket if I don't want to. My arms are still covered in stretch marks and have the chicken-wing look when I shake them, but I'm so comfortable with that, and I couldn't care less what anyone else thinks!

30.6.15

Had what is probably one of my biggest non-scale victories this morning. I'm a makeup artist but my brush belt has NEVER fit me and has always been miles too small for me. Well, today it fits me perfectly! YES!!!

CELEBRATING THOSE LITTLE VICTORIES was so important. First time wearing pants, first time wearing jeans, first time wearing shorts . . . those little things that smaller people take for granted were suddenly within my reach again. I guess over time those items had worked their way out of my wardrobe. I didn't realise when I was bigger that I missed wearing them, because they just weren't practical for me. But boy, once I found I could get into them again I realised what I had been missing out on. Now I can't believe I had to live so long without jeans—they're my go-to!



En route to Melbourne for Future Music, rocking my first pair of jeans.

While my weight loss was steady, and sometimes dramatic, I did hit plateaus just like everyone else. Naturally I had a big drop after the surgery, when I could hardly eat, but then things slowed down. It happened more and more as I went on—sometimes I would only lose 1 kg a week, or I would be stuck at the same weight for two, three, even four weeks as I got closer to my goal. It was a bit disheartening, but I tried to put it into perspective: a large amount of weight (or even any weight) wasn't going to come off every single week—that's not realistic. I just had to keep at it.

If I plateaued for more than two weeks I'd try to switch it up a bit; change the exercise I was doing or the things I was eating. Sometimes I'd add another workout, or I'd try a new tactic like eating my meals at different times. But it was an ongoing battle to keep motivated. When you're used to seeing results every week, it can be demotivating to hit a patch where things don't change.

I had to find a new way of thinking about all these changes, too. My goal

weight had been my primary motivation, but I needed to embrace the fact that this was a permanent lifestyle change. It wasn't a diet and exercise programme that I was sticking to until I hit my goal and could go back to my old ways. This was my life now, and it was making me fit and healthy—if that meant weight loss, then great, but learning to enjoy this lifestyle was critical. It wasn't going to work if I felt like I was depriving myself or forcing myself to exercise. I needed to find sustainable balance, even if that meant it took a little bit longer for the weight to come off.

As my journey went on, I tried to focus less on the weight loss and more on how I was feeling and how great my new lifestyle was.

As my journey went on, I tried to focus less on the weight loss and more on how I was feeling and how great my new lifestyle was. I started using little affirmations to give myself a boost and to celebrate everything I had achieved. I tried to reduce the pressure I was putting on myself to lose weight every week, recognising that I needed to lower the intensity and make sure the changes I was making were able to be maintained.

23.3.15 (Week 30)

Weight	Clothing size (top)		Clothing size (bottom)		
103.4 kg	14		20		
Chest	Upper arm	Waist	Hips	Thigh	Bra
102 cm	36 cm	92 cm	124 cm	71 cm	14DD

I have decided that as my reward for getting to under 100 kg (I am currently sitting at 103.4 kg) I am going to do a 16,500 feet skydive! It's something I have always wanted to do, but the weight restriction is 100 kg. Today I have booked in for 15 April, which gives me just over three weeks to lose 3.4 kg. I am soooo excited!!!!

I'VE TALKED ABOUT THE LITTLE sub-goals I liked to set myself along the way, and booking in for a skydive was one of the real highlights. I love getting an adrenaline rush—I am a bit of a speed freak. As a kid I went in for the daredevil stuff like skiing downhill as fast as I could, and I've always been drawn to adventure sports.

As I inched closer to 100 kg, I was looking for something fun to reward myself with. I did a bit of research and confirmed that skydiving had a weight limit of 100 kg, so I thought: *Perfect!* That was going to be my new goal.

I'd always thought that I would never be able to skydive. I had been over 100 kg for so many years, so it just seemed like something that would be impossible for me to do. To have this within my grasp was a fantastic feeling.

Making the booking gave me an extra burst of motivation to get those last few kilos off. At this stage in my journey, losing 3.4 kg in three weeks was going to be a big ask, so having a tangible reason to get that weight off was the big push I needed. It meant I had to work really hard to make sure the scales would read under 100 kg on the day.

I did the jump through Skydive Auckland, out on the Kaipara Harbour near Helensville. I went with two of my best friends, who waited on the ground for me. They knew what a huge deal it was for me (but they weren't game to do it themselves!).

It was the most bizarre feeling. As I went up in the plane the adrenaline was pumping, and my nerves started rising. Once we were up at altitude and they opened the door, my heart felt like it had dropped right out of my chest. The instructor I was jumping in tandem with took me over to sit on the edge and, honestly, I was freaking out. I hated having no control, but I knew he was going to throw me out of the plane no matter what and I just had to go with it. My heart was beating so fast.

I hated having no control, but I knew he was going to throw me out of the plane no matter what and I just had to go with it. My heart was beating so fast.

As soon as we jumped out of the plane and started to fall, I felt sick. My body flooded with terror, because suddenly I was dropping out of the sky and plummeting towards the earth. But then I started to enjoy it. It felt less like falling and more like floating. Those first five seconds had seemed to last a

lifetime, but once I started to appreciate the feeling it was really cool. Every part of my body was flapping in the wind, and it felt so liberating to be falling through the sky.

When the instructor pulled the parachute, my heart, which had just about returned to its normal position, was wrenched straight back up into my throat. I felt nauseous all over again, and that lasted pretty much all the way to the ground. The sudden jolt as the parachute arrested our fall was a real shock to the system, and I was only just coming right when we touched down. It was like being on the world's biggest rollercoaster.

There were amazing views from up there: the west coast beaches and the Kaipara River snaking through beautiful green farmland. The instructor let me control the parachute so I could swoop around a bit, which was super-cool.

Getting the photos back afterwards and watching the video of the fall was incredible. I've since had the chance to skydive again and I—excuse the pun—jumped at the opportunity. It's something I'd do over and over. It's quite an expensive treat, but it's an experience like no other.

27.4.15

Woke up this morning and tried on a pair of size-16 undies I bought right at the start of my journey, as a target to get to. They used to stop at my knees and now they fit! It's unreal to think that eight months ago my top half was a size 28 and my bottom half was 28/30, and I'm now a 14 on top and a 16 on the bottom. From 169 kg to 96.4 kg—that's 72.6 kg gone (and only 11.9 kg to go until I hit my goal weight). Now I'm off to Les Mills to try my first combat class.

ANOTHER BIG CHALLENGE I SET myself was doing the Tongariro Alpine Crossing, across volcanic Mt Tongariro in the centre of the North Island. This is one of the most popular day walks in New Zealand, but it's no walk in the park! It's nearly 20 km over some pretty rough terrain, and the weather can be very changeable.

I had wanted to do this iconic walk for ages—I love the idea of getting out

into New Zealand's great outdoors and exploring some of the incredibly special places we have here. I mean, how many other places in the world can you walk over an active volcano just a few hours outside a city of a million and a half people? When I was at school I had a few girlfriends who went and did the crossing, but at that stage it was something I could never join in on. So I decided I would make it happen for myself now.

I had a guy friend who wanted to do it, so we figured we'd make a weekend of it. We drove down together, got a good deal on accommodation and booked all our transfers, and off we went.

Everything came together for us like magic. The day before it had been raining and the day after it rained, too, but we were lucky enough to get a window of perfect weather. The views were amazing—I remember coming over the ridge and seeing the lakes laid out below us, and it just took my breath away. It truly is a special and remarkable place.

Even though I was getting really fit by this stage, it was hard work (it's a big day even for fit people!). My fitness was obviously much better than it had been but I still weighed almost 100 kg, so it was by no means easy. The walk up was okay, but the trek back down the other side was excruciating.

I was wearing some leather boots that I had assumed would be suitable, but they were a big mistake. On the walk down, my toes were shoving forward into the front of my boots so hard that it was almost unbearable. For the last 2 km I had to walk with my feet turned out and I was nearly in tears with every step. I am not a soft person; I was just in unbelievable pain.

When we finally reached the carpark at the end and I gingerly removed my boots, both my big toenails just peeled right off! At least that explained why they had been hurting so much. It took about eight months for those bad boys to grow back again, too. I had to have fake acrylic ones put on top while they were growing back, because they looked so revolting! How is a girl to wear open-toed shoes with toenails like that?

For the last 2 km I had to walk with my feet turned out and I was nearly in tears with every step. I am not a soft person; I was just in unbelievable pain.

But, toenails aside, I was so glad I had done the crossing—not just for the mind-blowing views but also for the sense of achievement. That walk was

something I hadn't thought I'd ever be able to do, but we'd nailed it. It made me want to do more things like that; things that would give me the same feeling of accomplishment.

I KEPT UP WITH MY SWIMMING after the Harbour Crossing. I was determined to do another ocean swim event, and in April 2015 I tackled the King of the Bays swim, from Milford to Takapuna on Auckland's North Shore. This time I was much better prepared—for the melee at the start, the cold water slapping me in the face, the crowds at the buoys—and I felt much more positive. And I didn't spend the whole time panicking about failing to make the finish line or having to be pulled out of the water!



Completing the Tongariro Alpine Crossing was a triumph.



All smiles after taking part in the King of the Bays ocean swim.

This swim is 2.8 km (so only 100 m shorter than the Harbour Crossing), but this time I nailed it in a smidgen over an hour. That was an improvement of *15 minutes* on my first ocean swim just five months earlier, and quite a decent time, if I may say so myself! Because it was along the shoreline I found it a bit easier, plus I'd done a lot more training.

This time I nailed it in a smidgen over an hour. That was an improvement of *15 minutes* on my first ocean swim just five months earlier, and quite a decent time, if I may say so myself!

At this stage I was also planning to do a half-marathon later in the year, despite my dislike of running. I have never really enjoyed it, and I still don't, but doing a half was a worthy goal and one that I knew would truly challenge me. I started my training by running short distances and power walking for a

bit in-between each run. I had no idea how I was ever going to run 21.1 km but, hey, a year earlier I couldn't even walk 10 per cent of that, so I was sure I would get there if I just kept training.

As it turned out, life had something else in store for me in 2015. But before I could get to that point, there were some dark moments coming.

CHAPTER 19

ME TOO

18.10.17

Me too.

I blamed myself because I was drunk. I must have asked for it. I must have wanted it.

I went to a house with five men for what I thought was an after-party.

I screamed no.

Over and over.

My mouth was covered and all I heard was laughter, and the words ‘You want it, bitch.’

It stopped after about two hours, and I left with no phone or handbag because I just wanted out. I had no way of calling for help or getting a ride home.

I was bleeding and I could barely walk. I finally managed to hail a taxi and he allowed me to pay via internet banking at the other end.

I rarely talk about this evening—I don’t like speaking about it. Until today only three people in my life knew.

My trust in human beings went out the window that night.

In my mind, I blamed myself. It was my fault; I must have looked like I wanted it. It was the dress I was wearing. Or the way I was dancing.

These questions taunted me every minute of every day for months.

I have learned to live with what happened; found ways of dealing with this terrifying event.

I should never have had to blame myself. I should never have thought this was my fault.

#metoo

DURING THE SECOND HALF OF my weight-loss year, in mid 2015, I was out on a Wednesday night with a couple of friends at a bar in town. By about 3 a.m. I was feeling quite drunk and ready to head home, but I didn't know where my friends had gone. A group of guys told me not to worry; there was an after-party going on in some townhouse down the bottom of Parnell.

I remember thinking that I shouldn't go with them, but I seemed to have lost the power to turn thought into action. I was conscious, but it was difficult to control my movements. On some level I registered that it wasn't because I was drunk; I suspect I had been drugged. The guys took me to a house and walked me inside, and that's when I realised what was going to happen.

For two hours, those five men gang-raped me. I did everything I could to stop them, but I had so little control over my body that it was hopeless. I couldn't push them off me, let alone run. I was physically there, but I couldn't do anything.

When it was all over, they let me go and I stumbled out of the house. I had no shoes and no handbag, so therefore no phone and no money. I had no idea where my things had gone, but I wasn't hanging around to try to find them.

I walked back towards town, wondering how I would get home without money or a phone. I had to hail a cab and beg the driver to accept an internet payment when we got to my house. I didn't explain what had happened, but my tears must have told him that something was very wrong. He agreed to take me, and I was so very thankful.

After it happened, I told my best friend, then two other close friends, but that was it. They reassured me that I had done nothing wrong, but I still put a lot of blame on myself. *What if I hadn't gone out that night? What if I hadn't had that last drink? What if I hadn't worn that dress?*

It scared me off socialising for quite a while. I didn't want to go out, I

didn't want to be around people, and I didn't want to put myself in a situation where something like that could happen again.

The day after it happened, I considered reporting it to the police. But what would I tell them? I didn't know any names, I couldn't reliably remember faces, and I wasn't sure exactly where I'd been. I knew the bar we'd left from, and roughly where the guys had taken me, but I couldn't give the police an address. Without hard facts, I wondered if it was pointless making a complaint. I know how hard it is for a woman to be believed in these situations, and how easy it is for the blame to be laid at her door.

In the days and weeks after the attack my mind was all over the place. My friends were gentle with me, and encouraged me to go to the police, but I just didn't feel up to it. Trying to process what had happened was taking all my mental energy—the last thing I felt like doing was marching down to the police station, especially if there was a chance they might not be sympathetic.

I think that at that stage I was still blaming myself. I convinced myself that it wasn't something I needed to report or take any further. And by the time I had recovered sufficiently to understand that it was not my fault at all, I felt that I had missed the window of opportunity. Any physical evidence was gone, and I knew that I would not be considered a very reliable witness. No one would take me seriously: why would I suddenly report it when it had happened months earlier? It had taken that long for mental clarity to return and for me to realise I should have gone straight to the police—if for no other reason than to stop it happening to someone else. Now I felt it was just too late.

I think that at that stage I was still blaming myself. I convinced myself that it wasn't something I needed to report or take any further.

I KNOW I SPEAK FOR many other women when I say that I just didn't expect it to happen to me. When you go out for a night with your friends, you don't expect to end up being drugged and raped. You don't expect to wake up the next day wondering if it was all a horrible dream, while nursing the physical marks that prove it was all too real. You don't expect the guilt and the shame, and the endless what-ifs that go round and round in your head.

You imagine that if the worst ever happens to you, you'll get up and go straight to the police and tell them what happened, and they'll leap into action and catch the scumbags.

It was just this one occasion where it didn't end where I thought it was going to end. And it can so easily happen to any one of us.

I just felt so violated—that's the only word for it. In all my years of going out to parties and bars I had always felt safe and secure. I'd never felt threatened, or fearful that someone might take advantage of me when I'd had too much to drink. I'd had more nights out than I could count, and there'd never been an issue getting home safely.

It was just this one occasion where it didn't end where I thought it was going to end. And it can so easily happen to any one of us.

At the time it happened, I certainly had no intention of telling the world via social media. But about 18 months afterwards, the Harvey Weinstein scandal broke in the US, and famous and not-so-famous women started posting their stories online with the hashtag #metoo. The idea behind the #metoo thing was to demonstrate the scale of the problem of sexual assault, and it gained momentum quickly as more and more women came forward. I was in Australia when this was all going on, and as I read other people's stories I began to wonder if I should share my experience, too.

I spent a couple of days thinking about it before I decided that I would do it. One of my close girlfriends shared a story that she'd never told me before, about a terrifying assault she had experienced, and that's what made up my mind. *Maybe if we talk about this stuff more, I thought, people will realise how incredibly common it is. They'll know that it's okay to come forward and it's okay to talk about it, and it's no shame on us.*

I wrote quite a simple post, without including much detail, then sat on it and thought about it for a few more hours before I posted it. I still had a huge fear of judgement—what if people read my story and blamed me? What if they said horrible things? I felt bad for my family, too—I had never told them what happened and it was going to be so hard for them to learn about this. I spoke to my mum before I posted anything, but my brothers found out when they read what I wrote online. They were incredibly supportive, letting me

know that they just wished they had been able to protect me. One of my brothers sent me a message saying he was so sorry he hadn't been there to help me.

So it wasn't easy, but I'm glad I did it. I got so much support and love from the followers on my Facebook page—it wasn't until *The New Zealand Herald* and other media picked it up that a few nasty comments appeared. 'She's making that up' or 'Why didn't she report it at the time?' and other bullshit like that. The kind of stuff only someone who's never experienced anything like this would write. But I was familiar with trolls by now, and I had to accept that when I shared my story it had moved beyond the circle of people who care about me and into the realm of the wider public—the realm where people have opinions on things they know nothing about, and aren't afraid to spout them online. I just needed to dismiss these haters and move on.

CHAPTER 20

TOO MUCH SKIN

20.5.15

This is extremely hard to post, so please bear with me on this one. Throughout my journey I have tried to be as honest as possible about every aspect of my weight loss, sharing the good, the bad and the ugly. Well, here is the ugly . . . it's not pretty, it's heavy and unattractive, but it's mine.

I have worked so hard for every gram of the 76 kg loss that has left me with what you see here [see [page 162](#)], and in some ways I guess I am proud to call this my stomach. But all this loose skin is something I am still trying to come to terms with. When I'm wearing clothing it's easily hidden with shapewear, but when I look at myself naked this is all I see.

As I've been losing weight I've managed to tone up my arms and legs and keep the loose skin there to a minimum, but that was not possible on my stomach and this is the result. (Excuse the PJs—they were just the easiest thing to roll down to show you the full extent.)

I HAD BEEN DOING AS MUCH toning work as possible during the

course of my weight loss, but it was becoming obvious that I was going to be left with a lot of excess skin hanging off my body. As the fat underneath disappeared, the skin on top had lost its elasticity and it was all going south—literally! Folds of skin were hanging off me. And my boobs?! My God, they were the worst. I had lost a lot of the volume from my breasts, dropping down from a 22DD to a 12D, and they were turning into two sad flaps of skin. They were so droopy!

Many people who lose a large amount of weight are left with excess skin hanging off their body, and it can be really disheartening. I knew that my new body was in there somewhere, but the rolls of skin that now drooped off my stomach and back, and of course my shockingly saggy boobs, were an unavoidable reality—especially when I had no clothes on. I could look amazing in my new outfits with makeup on, but what was underneath was not that attractive.

It was hard, because I was putting so much effort into working out and I really wanted to see the results. Even though I now had strong abdominals, they were nowhere in sight!



The photo I posted in my PJs in May 2015, showing the loose skin on my tummy.

I tried to tell myself that the loose skin was a small price to pay for the weight I'd lost and the improvements to my overall health. Sure, I didn't have a tiny waist to show off, but I was no longer at risk of dying from obesity-related diseases, and that had to be a win, right? I'd rather have that loose skin than still be 169 kg, that was for sure.

I did my best to focus on the things I had achieved, rather than letting myself get down about the skin. But it still bothered me.

I didn't have a tiny waist to show off, but I was no longer at risk of dying from obesity-related diseases, and that had to be a win, right?

At the start of my journey I had thought to myself, *Maybe I'll be one of the*

lucky ones, and my skin will just stretch back into place as my body shrinks underneath it. But by this stage I was realising that it wasn't going to happen. I had to face facts and be practical about it. That's when I started researching the cost of a breast lift, implants and a tummy tuck, so that I could save up the money.

I was hearing a lot of good things about having this kind of surgery in Thailand. I talked to friends of friends and read loads of reviews online, and everyone who'd done it had raved about it. The price would be about an eighth of what it would cost to have it done in New Zealand, and money was a huge issue for me at that time—nannying doesn't pay that well, and I had rent and car-running costs and all the usual expenses to cover. I decided I was going to start putting money aside so that I could meet this new goal. It didn't seem right to go through this incredible weight-loss journey and be left with a body I wasn't 100 per cent happy with.

Posting revealing photos of myself on Facebook is never easy. Even though I was getting used to having a larger following, and I was proud of my weight loss, sharing the reality of my body was daunting.

People can be funny when you say you're getting a boob job, but it was never about size for me. In fact, I didn't really have a size in mind for my new breasts. Right then I would have been happy with a flat chest, as long as it wasn't saggy! I'd got used to having smaller boobs, and I just wanted to get rid of all the excess skin.

Posting revealing photos of myself on Facebook is never easy. Even though I was getting used to having a larger following, and I was proud of my weight loss, sharing the reality of my body was daunting. There was still that fear of judgement and what other people might think. But at the same time, I was proud of how far I'd come and the way I was smashing my goals, and I wanted to do it for me as much for other people. It was a record of how much progress I was making.

One of the big things that has always been important to me is being honest about weight loss. I'm no airbrushed and Photoshopped glamour model—while I know my good angles and how to work with lighting, I definitely want to keep it real.

In a way it was quite liberating posting the photos of my excess skin, because it meant I didn't have to hide anything. I felt that if I was being open and honest and showing people what I really looked like, no one could hold it against me. I was the first person to state, 'This is my body and this is what it looks like, flaws and all,' so no one could ridicule me or say, 'I bet you look different underneath.' That's why I've tried to be 100 per cent honest from day one—if I eat something naughty, or do something that's a bit against my lifestyle plan, then I just admit to it, so no one can call me out on it. No one can say 'But I saw you down the mall eating a doughnut,' because chances are I've already posted about it!

30.5.15 (Week 40)

Weight	Clothing size (top)		Clothing size (bottom)		
90 kg	12		14		
Chest	Upper arm	Waist	Hips	Thigh	Bra
95 cm	33 cm	81 cm	112 cm	66 cm	12D

27.6.15 (Week 44)

Weight	Clothing size (top)		Clothing size (bottom)		
87.55 kg	12		14		
Chest	Upper arm	Waist	Hips	Thigh	Bra
92 cm	32 cm	79 cm	108 cm	64 cm	12D

AS I GOT CLOSER AND CLOSER to my goal weight, the remaining weight seemed to come off incredibly slowly. It got harder and harder to encourage my body to shed those last few kilos. I wasn't that surprised, because it's a very common struggle—your body really wants to hold on to that last bit of fat! My approach was to switch up my exercise by adding something new or changing my routine a bit. My eating was already so clean that there wasn't much I could tweak, so it came down to exercise. This stage of my journey was no time to start 'dieting'—I didn't want to be limiting my intake and denying myself things, or reducing the amount of energy I had

available for exercise. I needed to be able to sustain what I was doing, rather than crash dieting just to reach a goal. With a crash diet, chances are the weight will bounce right back once you get there.

Unfortunately your body is not your friend sometimes—it adjusts to the amount of exercise you throw at it, and it can get a bit comfortable. It thinks, *Oh, I'll just sit here and enjoy being this weight; I don't need to work too hard*, and the next thing you know, you're stuck. You need to sneak up on your body and surprise it! Throw some exercise at it that it's not expecting. It might be an extra class or a different type of exercise—just something to wake it up and get it back on the weight-loss track.

One of the other weird things about my weight loss was that my shoe size actually went down! I guess I must have had fat feet, too. I used to wear a size 10 in my teens, but getting into a 10 became a huge squeeze as I got bigger—my feet were the same length, but they were too wide. So for ages I had been a size 11, which is pretty big for a woman. It was so nice to drop back down to a standard 10 and be able to buy pretty much any shoe I wanted.

I GOT THE IDEA THAT I wanted to do something drastic looks-wise when I reached my goal weight, so I decided to go back to my natural hair colour. I knew it would be a long process—I had been dark for a long time, and I couldn't just grow it out because the blonde roots would be a nightmare. So, a few months before the one-year deadline I started to get my hair lightened up, figuring that a progressive change wouldn't be as much of a shock to it as going blonde all at once. I didn't need it falling out on me again!

**I knew that the change in my body was impossible to miss,
but my aim was to look nothing like my old self at all.**

I wanted the 'before' and 'after' shots at one year to look completely different, and colouring my hair was part of that. I knew that the change in my body was impossible to miss, but my aim was to look nothing like my old self at all.

As well as going light, I decided to cut my hair short. It turned out to be

one of the most freeing, liberating things I'd ever done, but at the time it was terrifying—I was so used to hiding behind this curtain of long hair, styling it beautifully so people would notice my hair and not my weight. Now I was sitting in the chair thinking, *What if I look awful?*

But it was too late to change my mind. The hairdresser cut off my ponytail in one go, and suddenly I had all this hair around my face and I was like, *Wow, it looks fine!* I realised I didn't need my hair to define me anymore, and that felt amazing. Having such a dramatic change was great for me—it was super-blonde and super-short (it wasn't a buzz cut or anything, but super-short by my standards!), and I loved it.

CHAPTER 21

GOAL WEIGHT!

11.7.15 (Week 46)

Weight	Clothing size (top)		Clothing size (bottom)		
83.85 kg	12		14		
Chest	Upper arm	Waist	Hips	Thigh	Bra
90 cm	31 cm	76 cm	104 cm	63 cm	12D

I am officially half the person I was 11 months ago! From 169 kg to 83.85 kg—I can't even explain in words what this accomplishment feels like. I set myself a goal that seemed so far out of reach at the time but I have stuck to it, and with a lot of determination, willpower, drive, motivation and compromise I have achieved my goal. Proud doesn't even begin to describe this feeling! Every 5 a.m. start, every single workout, every tear, every crying fit has been worth it! And I have gone from a BMI of 51.6 to 25.6.

Now, in no way does this mean my journey is over. From here I am setting myself many more goals: from maintenance to toning, increasing weights at the gym, half-marathon to full marathon, more ocean swims and more sporting teams. This is just the beginning of a brand-new and improved me, one who won't let anything or anyone get in the way of

achieving whatever I put my mind to. COME AT ME, WORLD!!!!

AND THEN, SUDDENLY, ONE DAY, it finally happened. I stepped on the scales on 11 July 2015—46 weeks after I started my journey to health—and I was 83.85 kg. I had lost literally half my body weight in six weeks short of a year. I had reduced my BMI from 51.6 (morbidly obese) to 25.6, which is just outside the top end of the ‘healthy weight’ category.

It was the most insane feeling. I screamed out to my best friend and flatmate Jess to come and have a look at the scales, as the tears rolled down my face. She gave me a massive hug, then we spent over an hour talking about what I had done and how far I had come. Although I was crying, at the same time I couldn’t wipe the smile off my face.

I posted my news online and sat back enjoying the response from my followers. The post quickly blew up with the most heart-warming, supportive comments—it was like everyone who had been following my journey was celebrating along with me.

But amid all the excitement and congratulations, something really weird happened. People started calling me out online, suggesting that I was a liar and a faker and that I’d never lost the weight. *What?!*

To celebrate reaching my goal weight, I had posted before and after photos. In the second pic I was wearing high-waisted yoga pants, which hid a lot of the loose skin on my stomach. It wasn’t calculated—of course I wanted to look good for the picture, but that was exactly how I would wear those pants to the gym.

Not only was it being shared on other people’s Facebook pages, but it got picked up by news outlets worldwide like *The Huffington Post* and the *Daily Mail*.

Well, that pair of photos went viral. Not only was it being shared on other people’s Facebook pages, but it got picked up by news outlets worldwide like *The Huffington Post* and the *Daily Mail*. And that’s when the comments started: ‘Those two aren’t the same person. Look, the hair colour’s changed, and the skin colour’s not the same, and it’s a different background and she’s

holding a different phone' . . . Honestly, how stupid can some people be? They pulled it apart in any way they could think of.

In my head I knew I didn't have to justify it. I knew what I'd achieved, and I sure as hell knew I was the same person in both pictures! But it kept eating away at me: *I have worked so hard for this and you are trying to say I didn't do it?* I decided I would show them. I posted the same before and after photos—then I added a third photo, where I pulled down the top of my yoga pants to reveal the full effect of the loose skin.

Well, that picture went even *more* viral. It got picked up all over the world, with headlines like 'Girl who lost weight fights back at trolls'. If it was a big story before, it was even more huge once I released the third pic! And now there was not a single person who could criticise me by claiming my photos were fake.

13.7.15

I don't know why, but every single comment that called me out for being fake and a liar bothered me far more than it should. I think it's because it took hours of crying and debating before I was able to share my story online for others to read. Posting that first picture of my weight for the world to see was the hardest thing I have ever done. And then when it came to posting about my loose skin—well, that was equally as tough. Throughout my journey I have tried to be completely honest about the whole experience, and to tell people exactly what's happened as it's happened, so to be called a fake really hurts.

So here we go. I hope this helps all the 'non-believers'. Yes, my hair and eyebrows are a different colour because I'm going back to blonde. Yes, I have changed my phone from Samsung to Apple and I've moved house so the background has changed (it has been 11 months, people, things change!). My skin colour varies in every single post as I get a spray tan once a week on a Thursday and I often change the depth of colour depending on what event I have on that weekend. Yes, I have loose skin and stretch marks, but I don't feel the need to show them in every single photo I post online. I have shared my excess skin pictures before, so if you had bothered to click on my page you would have seen them. And as for my ears changing in appearance?! Well, I can't see that

so, ha ha, who the hell knows?! Maybe weight loss changes ears, LOL.
Hope this helps.

I'VE NOW LOST 85.7 kg. GO ME!



The set of three pics that set social media alight.

OF COURSE, AFTER EVERYTHING I had been through, I had to throw a big party for my friends and family to celebrate reaching my goal weight! I have a friend who runs an events company, so he helped me organise it. Once again my aunty's backyard was put to good use, with another marquee going up. (I told you I love a good party!)

One of the interesting things about the party was that I managed to get a few sponsors on board to share the expenses. This was the first time I realised that my reach and visibility through social media could be useful from a

financial point of view. Everyone I approached was really keen to be part of it, and that helped to cover the costs of the flowers and food.

The party was about celebrating what I had achieved over the past year with family and friends, and naturally I was keen to get glammed up. I had seen a gorgeous dress online, by Chinese retail group AliExpress, but I wanted it in a different colour. They were amazing: they had less than two and a half weeks to custom-make it for me and get it to New Zealand, but they delivered big-time—I don't think I have ever loved a dress more in my life. I felt like a complete princess (in a good way).

I knew this wasn't the end of my journey. But it felt so good to stop, look back and acknowledge my achievement.

I knew this wasn't the end of my journey—my weight and health were things I was going to have to work on for life, and I would have to maintain my new healthy habits from then until forever. But it felt so good to stop, look back and acknowledge my achievement. I had done what I'd said I was going to do, and I'd done it in the timeframe I had set myself—a bit earlier, even!

CHAPTER 22

INSTA-FAMOUS

THIS WAS ALSO THE POINT when my life just went crazy. I remember going to bed one night, then checking one of my social media pages in the morning and seeing it had gone up 8000 likes. The story had become bigger than me (even when I was at my biggest, ha ha). While I really had no idea what lay ahead, it began to dawn on me how much my life and my journey had become public property. I hadn't realised up until then how much power that sort of worldwide media exposure would have.

The *Sunrise* programme in Australia picked up on my story, as did TVNZ at home of course, and all this coverage started to grow my following quite quickly. There was an article about me in *The New Zealand Herald*, and I got asked to go into the studio and chat with the team from The Edge radio station. It was all super-exciting and fun, but it also made me realise the power that my posts could have, and the reach I now had into the wider world. I really wanted to use that reach to do good things—I had been on this amazing journey and rescued my own health, so maybe I could help other people do the same.

I didn't know anything about managing social media, or posting strategically, or increasing post reach or blah blah blah. I was still just myself, doing my thing—but I was

doing it in front of hundreds of thousands of strangers.

It made me re-evaluate what I was posting, too: my audience had gone way beyond friends, and friends of friends, and people down the road in other parts of New Zealand. I was now being followed, watched, supported and judged by people all over the world, most of whom had no idea who I really was as a person. Every time I went to post something, I had to think: *Do I want this to be seen worldwide?* I put more thought into how I worded my posts, asking myself if what I wrote was going to offend anyone, or if it could be interpreted in the wrong way and set off a social-media storm of some kind. I was used to communicating with people who know and understand the way I speak and my language and humour; now that I was public property I had to be a lot more careful.

Obviously I had no experience in this arena—I was just a 24-year-old nanny from Auckland, New Zealand. I didn't know anything about managing social media, or posting strategically, or increasing post reach or blah blah blah. I was still just myself, doing my thing—but I was doing it in front of hundreds of thousands of strangers. I didn't want to become Insta-famous for something negative after all the positive support I had received.

And it was all just on me—I was totally winging it. I didn't have anyone managing me or giving me advice. When companies and agencies started approaching me, asking me to include their products in my posts, I didn't really know how to handle it. I had been tagging companies and suppliers that I liked for a while, partly to give them some credit but mostly to preempt all the 'Where did you get that such-and-such?' questions. But now it seemed like this was serious business.

Meanwhile, all the media requests were coming directly through my social-media pages or my email, and I had to juggle those myself as well. I saw this coverage as an opportunity to grow my audience on social media and share my story further, so I pretty much said yes to everybody. A lot of interviews were done over the phone or through Skype.

This was the first time I'd ever done any 'media'—I'd never been interviewed before and I'd certainly never been on TV. And now I had a German TV crew flying all the way from the other side of the world to do a story on me! Three of them spent two days following me around, videoing me and putting together a story about my life. It was mind-blowing.

Although I tried to take it in my stride, I was pretty surprised by all the attention. To this day it still shocks me that so many thousands of people are interested in what I'm up to, and care about my opinion!



Suddenly I was doing all kinds of media, from women's magazines to videos for Japanese channels. The article at the top appeared after my skin-removal surgery (see next chapter).

When I reflect on it, I think that much of the reason things took off for me came down to timing: at that point there weren't many people sharing stories like mine online. I was very open about the reality of weight loss, so I stood out a bit because my story was unique. I'm not sure it would be the same if someone set up a similar page now.

ANOTHER OF THE POSITIVE ASPECTS of having a high profile on social media was that I could start to use my reach to help charities and promote good causes. Sometimes organisations came to me, and sometimes I would pursue a charity I was interested in and help them out by giving them a plug.

Eat My Lunch was one of the places I approached, because I loved what they were doing: providing healthy, nutritious lunches for kids in low-decile schools. When customers place an order with the company, they get a gourmet lunch for themselves and they cover the cost of a decent lunch for a child in the community as well. The kitchen is staffed with volunteers, so I offered to come along one day and pitch in. It was amazing to go behind the scenes and see how (then-husband-and-wife) Iaan Buchanan and Lisa King were running the organisation. They basically had a lunch production line operating out of their kitchen while they were getting their kids ready for school!

Here was an opportunity for me to make a difference through raising awareness. I went home and posted about my experience, letting people know how they could support Eat My Lunch by either placing an order or physically helping out in the kitchen.

I have a special place in my heart for charities and companies like Eat My Lunch that are New Zealand-based and are doing good work in my home country. I've always believed that charity begins at home—there are so many needy kids and families who we can help right here before we look overseas to provide aid. And I'm also aware that my life is incredibly blessed, and that I have a lot to share with others who might not be so lucky.

CHAPTER 23

THE CALL THAT CHANGED MY LIFE—AGAIN

REACHING MY GOAL WEIGHT WAS a huge milestone and I was over the moon when I could tick that off my list, but it was never going to be the end for me. There were many more things I wanted to achieve—and getting rid of what felt like a tonne of loose skin was high on my agenda.

After hitting my goal weight I continued to lose a little more each week, but when I got down to about 81 kg that came to a halt. No matter how I tweaked my routine, no more weight would come off, and I eventually realised that this was the weight my body was supposed to be. It was my body's happy point. I was really pleased with the shape I was in, too: I wasn't stick-thin, but that had never been my objective. I had reached a healthy weight for my height and I could do everything I wanted to, so I knew that was where my body needed to be.

I could have pushed myself to get even thinner, but it would have meant giving up so much more and potentially making me miserable.

There has to come a point where you stop losing weight. I could have

pushed myself to get even thinner, but it would have meant giving up so much more and potentially making me miserable. I would've had to up my exercise even further and cut back on my social life, and I just didn't feel it was worth it. I had done what I set out to do—and more. I now had a healthy BMI and my body fat percentage was just under 20 per cent (this put me in the 'athlete' category, which I found quite hard-case, considering where I'd started from). I also needed my weight loss to be sustainable; there was no point in pushing my body down to a weight it couldn't maintain, then gaining those kilos back again. So that was that—at around 81 kg I stayed.

THEN I GOT A PHONE call that would change my life once again. I was still saving towards having my surgery in Thailand, but as I continued to research all the options I came across an American plastic surgeon by the name of Dr Remus Repta (his family is Romanian). Dr Repta was based in Scottsdale, Arizona, just outside of Phoenix, and specialised in appearance surgeries like rhinoplasties (nose jobs) and face lifts. He had also successfully performed a large number of tummy tucks, 'mommy makeovers' and other skin-removal and skin-tightening surgeries.

Unbelievably, the surgery would be free—all I had to do was get myself to Scottsdale and back, and pay for my accommodation and other expenses while I was away.

After my story went viral his media team reached out and spent some time talking with me and, in early August 2015, the momentous phone call came. They were getting back in touch to say that Dr Repta wanted to take my case! And, unbelievably, the surgery would be free—all I had to do was get myself to Scottsdale and back, and pay for my accommodation and other expenses while I was away.

It was too good an opportunity to pass up, and it almost seemed too good to be true. As the emails were flying back and forth, confirming the arrangements, I kept thinking, *I'm going to turn up in America and it's all going to be a big fraud*. I couldn't believe it was actually going to happen—that somebody would give me US\$38,000 worth of surgery in exchange for the profile they would get from it. It wasn't until I got off the plane and saw

the media team waiting for me that I truly accepted it was real, and that I was finally going to get the surgery I had dreamed about for so long.

There was just no way that I could have paid for this surgery—even now, more than two years later, I would still be saving up for it! At the time they offered it to me there would have been no chance at all.

Everything happened quickly after that. Once I shared my news online I had loads of followers wanting to donate money towards the travel costs, and I ended up creating a Givealittle page so that people who wanted to donate could do so. I hadn't expected anyone else to help me—it was something I wanted to do myself—but the more I pushed back and said no, the more people insisted, saying they would set up a page for me anyway! So I decided that I would accept people's generosity and that I would manage the page myself. I only posted about it once or twice as I didn't want to be pushy, but in the end that page raised just over \$5000, which I was hugely grateful for. That covered my flights to the US and my accommodation. I also had to sort out comprehensive medical insurance—as you might be aware, medical care in the US is cripplingly expensive, so I needed to be well covered in case something went wrong.

The comments and the messages of support I received were staggering—there was one woman who had won \$200 playing Lotto and decided to give me half, because it had been a lucky win for her and she wanted to share it. I felt truly humbled that people I didn't even know wanted to help me realise my dreams.

Because of the cost, I arranged to go by myself rather than taking a support person with me. I felt okay about that decision beforehand—you know, I was only going halfway round the world to have major surgery and then fly myself home!—but after the operation I regretted not taking someone with me. I'm an independent person, and it didn't seem like that big a deal when I was contemplating it from my bedroom at home, but I don't think I really understood what a major undertaking it was going to be. The surgery was way more serious than I expected, and my recovery was much more difficult and prolonged. It would have been so good to have someone there to lend emotional support, let alone someone to help me with all the physical stuff.

I was in a bit of a dreamland about how fantastic the final result was going to be and how great my new body was

going to look, and not so focused on the practical aspects of how it was actually going to come about!

I was in a bit of a dreamland about how fantastic the final result was going to be and how great my new body was going to look, and not so focused on the practical aspects of how it was actually going to come about! I see myself as quite a tough person, and I'd been through so much already that I didn't think this next phase was going to be a big deal either. But nothing could have prepared me for the reality.

Dr Repta has quite a high profile and does a lot of media, so there was plenty of information about him online that I could research. He seemed like a very kind, softly spoken man who wasn't overpowering or pushy in any way—not what you might imagine the stereotypical American plastic surgeon to be like. When you hear him speak, you truly feel that he has his patients' best interests at heart. He also came across as very open and transparent, which I liked—he talked about all his surgeries that had gone right, as well as those where there were complications or things didn't go entirely to plan. He wasn't trying to glorify himself and make himself out to be perfect.

In my head I had always imagined plastic surgeons to be rather showy and over the top, but he seemed the exact opposite—genuine and compassionate. Not to mention that he looked like something off the cover of a Mills & Boon novel. He was in his late 30s, with shoulder-length hair and the most amazing skin. That certainly didn't hurt!

The technical name for the procedure I was going to have to remove the excess skin on my stomach is a panniculectomy. I was also going to have a tummy tuck or abdominoplasty, where the abdominal muscles beneath the excess skin are sewn together and tightened up; a breast lift and augmentation (that is, tightening up the skin and adding implants to give my boobs back their shape); and Embrace scar therapy on the resulting scars. My main concern was the skin on my stomach, but Dr Repta recommended doing the other procedures at the same time. While removing the skin would make the biggest difference to me personally, doing the other bits as well (especially my breasts) would create an overall result that he said would be amazing. I was so overwhelmed that these extras were even possible—I hadn't dared hope for those as well—that of course I agreed straight away!

The more we talked over Skype and discussed my body, the more understanding he gained of what he was dealing with. Even if he sorted out the loose skin on my tummy, I was still going to have hanging folds of it on my sides and back. He suggested doing an extended boob job and a bra-line back lift: the idea was to tidy up that whole top half and not leave any loose skin hanging around. There was no point in having a nice flat tummy if I had folds drooping off my back and sides! Dr Repta was clearly looking for the best possible outcome, both for me and to showcase his incredible skills. So we decided to go the whole hog and do the skin removal all around my torso. I would essentially be having four procedures at once.

The surgery I was now facing was so major that there was no way I could have any work done on my bottom half, as much as I would have liked to. It would just be too much for my body to go through at one time. Of course I would have loved to get it all sorted out in one go, but I respected Dr Repta's years of training and experience and trusted that he knew what was best for me.

I was going to be under the knife for almost 10 hours, which was fine as far as I was concerned, because I would be asleep the whole time! But doing this sort of work must be gruelling for the surgeon. Imagine having to concentrate for that long, doing such delicate and intense work! He has performed a few other major surgeries like mine, but most of his work is not so extensive.

We had lots of Skype conversations in the months leading up to the big day, which was a welcome chance for me to get to know the man who was going to slice me up and stick me back together. I gained more of an insight into what kind of person he was, and what I could expect from the experience. It was great to establish such a level of trust before I headed over to Arizona; I felt like I knew him before I'd even met him in the flesh.

I could see that it was definitely going to be a better choice for me than having the surgery done in Thailand, where most of the surgeons don't speak English and everything has to be done through translators and intermediaries. You don't get the chance to have a proper conversation with the surgeon and really go into detail about what will happen. All the information you get is second-hand. While that's not necessarily a problem, being able to talk to Dr Repta so fully and frankly added an extra layer of security for me. I knew I was going to be in safe hands.

CHAPTER 24

BECOMING A VLOGGER

IT WAS WHILE I WAS PREPARING to go to the US that I started vlogging (video blogging). I was about to go through something that was so huge and so life-changing, and I realised that this was an opportunity for me to help other people who might be looking at their options after extreme weight loss. I figured that if I documented the experience as I went along, a lot of others might be able to benefit from it. I could give them an honest, open, uncensored view of what the surgery was actually like, both before and after.

Still images are all very well, but they are easy to stage and alter. It seemed to me that video was a more immediate and real medium through which to tell my story and show the changes my body was undergoing. And I liked the idea of capturing exactly how I felt at those key moments in time. Video would give me a forum to express my thoughts very openly, and also more fully. There is only so much you can write in a Facebook post, whereas this was a way for people who wanted to know more—who needed the nitty-gritty—to sit down and watch me having a chat about the whole thing.

I decided from the beginning that if I was going to do videos and set up a YouTube channel then I had to have good gear. I didn't want to be uploading grainy, badly lit iPhone footage that looked amateurish. So I went out and sourced the best gear I could afford. At that stage I couldn't even get hire purchase (I didn't earn enough money), so I asked my grandmother to take

out an agreement on my behalf and I arranged to pay her back each week. I bought a Canon 70D digital SLR camera and a tripod, and I was in business! I knew that with that equipment I could make good-quality videos that people could watch and glean information from, including clear images of what my body looked like.

It's turned out to be a priceless record of what I went through, and I hope it is a useful resource for anyone considering similar surgeries. I have learned a lot about vlogging since then, but I still think my first efforts were pretty good, and I'm glad I made that investment.

For my first vlog I was alone in my room. I set up the camera on its tripod, shut the door and filmed myself talking about how excited I was about the trip. I didn't have any kind of script or much idea of where I was going with it—I just thought I would start and see what came out of my mouth. In that first video I tried to show what my body looked like at that point. It was a bit of a juggle trying to do it without flashing my naughty bits and getting struck off YouTube! (Nipples are a no-no, apparently.) And then I just talked about how I was feeling, the planning I had done so far and what was happening next.

I got a really positive response to my first vlog, which was encouraging. In the first week alone I gained over 2000 subscribers and had nearly 20,000 views!

YOUTUBE IS A BIT OF a funny space; there are a lot of trolls and, in my experience, people are far nastier on there than on any other platform. It's probably because users are more anonymous. All you have is a username—no profile or newsfeed or anything. There is nothing to click back through to find out more about a person. Some people who commented on my video were absolutely awful, saying I looked like a war veteran or just ripping me apart. But there were so many positive comments as well: people saying how pleased they were to follow me on my journey because they were going through something similar, and how great it was to see someone they could relate to having the same experience.

I just deleted the horrible comments; I couldn't be bothered with them. Some of my videos are still pretty popular today, thanks to more people finding me and wanting information about my surgery, so I'm always getting new comments. These days I often leave the mean ones there—it's not a

channel that I look at every day so it doesn't bother me so much, although if I find something really nasty I'll delete it. On my other channels (Facebook and Instagram, for example) I make a bigger effort to keep up with the nasty comments and hide or delete them, as I'm on there much more often.

The weird thing about watching those videos now is that I look so, so different—and not just because I had blonde hair at the time. I had big folds of sagging skin in my lower face and around my mouth—again a legacy of my weight loss—so after the surgery I decided to have fillers done at Caci Clinic. The fillers were placed higher up in my cheeks, which lifted my whole face and made the folds not nearly so obvious. I didn't realise how much of a difference it was going to make, but it really does make me look a lot more youthful. I have to have them touched up every 18 months or so, which isn't too bad, and each time you have it done you need less filler.

The weird thing about watching those videos now is that I look so, so different—and not just because I had blonde hair at the time.

Getting my teeth veneered was another big bonus out of nowhere. The team at Vogue Dental Studios in Melbourne got in touch with me and suggested having porcelain veneers applied, to whiten my smile and make it more even.

I've always had a bit of an issue with my front two teeth, which were worn down due to me grinding them in my sleep. The chance to have that corrected was what convinced me in the end. I decided to get those repaired, and I had porcelain veneers attached to the front 10 of my top teeth. One thing to be aware of if you're considering having this done is that it's a permanent decision, because the dentist has to grind back the top surface of your teeth in order to affix them!

I had actually been thinking about getting the procedure done in early 2016 when I was in Bali for a wedding but, funnily enough, on the day I was supposed to go and see a dentist up there, the email came through from Melbourne. I had a chat to Mum—she'd had veneers done a few years back, and her teeth still look brilliant—and while she said it was completely my decision, she did agree it was an awesome opportunity as they were offering the service for free.

Vogue made the procedure so quick and easy for me, too. Usually it takes a month of toing and froing to get all the work done, but to speed up the process I had the pre-appointments and the moulds done with a dentist here in New Zealand who's aligned with them. After that they were able to do the whole job over five days in Melbourne. It wasn't painful at all—the only thing that was slightly unpleasant was the fact that I had a cold and wanted to cough all the time, which made it a bit tricky when the dentist needed me to keep my mouth open!

The result was amazing and I am super-pleased with my new smile. It really does make a difference when I'm being photographed or making videos—which, after all, has become my life now.

CHAPTER 25

SCOTTSDALE, AZ

I STARTED GETTING ORGANISED pretty far in advance for my big trip. About a fortnight before flying out I was already packing! I had never travelled so far away from home before.

Looking back, I think I took way too much stuff. I had been asking my followers on Facebook what I should pack, and I ended up with a long list. I decided to take some of my protein powder and my George Foreman mixer, so I could have my usual meals like banana and protein powder with water and ice in the mornings. I just thought I might feel a bit more at home if I tried to stick to my usual routine as much as possible. Another big thing was the fact that I wouldn't be able to shower for quite a while after the surgery, so I stocked up on wet wipes and dry shampoo. I knew I could get all those things in the States but I was going to fly in on the Saturday, acclimatise for a day, go to my pre-op appointment on the Monday and then have the surgery on the Tuesday, so I was worried there wasn't going to be enough time to get the things I needed (and you know I love to be organised and prepared!).

I also went a bit nuts and bought myself some new bikinis to wear after the surgery—I knew I wouldn't be getting into them straight away, but it was nice to have something to look forward to when I got home and summer rolled around. And of course I packed lots of cool outfits and some false eyelashes. Just because I was having surgery didn't mean I was going to stop being glamorous! I think I was a bit optimistic, however.

TWO WEEKS BEFORE THE SURGERY I did my first ‘revealing’ vlog—actually taking my clothes off in front of the camera. I thought it was important to let people see what was really there under my clothes and why I was having the surgery.

Although I’d posted photos online before, I was pretty nervous doing it ‘live’, where there was no opportunity to choose the angles I felt comfortable with. Still, it was an important part of the process, so I just took a breath and lifted up my shirt to show off my tummy and then my back. I also lifted up my belly ‘apron’, the fold of skin that flopped down over the top of my undies. It was a bit difficult explaining what was going to happen to my breasts—you have to be careful what you show on YouTube or else you get in trouble. But I was able to give viewers a basic idea of the transformation my body was about to undergo.

A week out from the surgery I was feeling pretty hyper. I was starting to have trouble sleeping properly; I’d be lying awake until two or three in the morning with my brain running on overtime. I wasn’t worried—I was super-excited. I couldn’t wait to get over there and get it done.

I had absolutely no nerves at all, right up until the morning of the surgery, when the enormity of what I was about to experience finally began to sink in.

TWENTY-FOUR HOURS AFTER LEAVING AUCKLAND, I was due to arrive in Scottsdale, Arizona, on the north-eastern edge of Phoenix. It was hard saying goodbye to my friends and family, but once I was on the plane I was amped. This was the longest plane trip I’d ever been on: nine hours to Honolulu, where I would grab my bags and clear customs, a fair bit of waiting around, then on to the next leg direct to Phoenix.

I felt like a bit of a rock star getting off the plane in Arizona: there was a media team with a camera waiting for me! As part of the arrangement with Dr Repta, my whole experience was going to be videoed and used in promotional pieces. They also wanted me to do some voice-overs for Dr Repta’s ads on Pandora (a streaming radio service) about the surgery and my transformation. On top of that, quite a few news channels in the US were interested in covering the story, interviewing and filming me, so a marketing team from a company called Knoodle was managing all that.

They were all very welcoming and made me feel at home straight away—which was just as well, because I was a very long way from my actual home

and I'd had almost no sleep for 24 hours. I was feeling pretty emotional; a combination of lack of sleep, lack of proper food and too many hours in the air with nothing to do but think about what lay ahead of me. They took me to the hotel I was staying at and made sure I was settled in before leaving me to try to get some rest.

I was feeling pretty emotional; a combination of lack of sleep, lack of proper food and too many hours in the air with nothing to do but think about what lay ahead of me.

I'd arrived about 11 p.m. local time, but I didn't get to sleep until about 3.30 a.m. Part of the problem was that I was really hungry, because I had only eaten a few mouthfuls of food at a time on the plane. I contemplated going out to find some food, but in the end I told myself to just try to sleep and get what rest I could.

I WAS UP AGAIN AT 9 A.M. when my alarm went off. I wanted to make sure I adjusted to local time as quickly as possible, so I couldn't sleep the day away. Then I had the genius idea of going for a run to Scottsdale Fashion Square, a luxury shopping mall I'd heard about that was supposed to be reasonably close by. I figured I would get some much-needed exercise as well as saving money on a cab fare.

Bad idea. I didn't realise quite how hot it was going to be, and I didn't take a water bottle. About halfway there I started feeling really sick, and I wasn't sure I was going to make it. But I didn't have a local SIM card for my mobile yet, so I couldn't call a taxi.

I struggled on to the mall, and the first thing I did when I got there was buy a bottle of water! Then I sorted out a SIM card so I could call the media team and make plans for the day. I was just paying for that when the room started going white and spinning.

'I'm sorry, I have to sit down,' I said to the cashier, abandoning my purchase.

Having someone recognise me—even in the state I was in

—put me in an awesome mood again and I temporarily forgot about how bad I was feeling.

I dropped my bag as I was hurrying out the door, and then my vision went completely. I was stumbling around blindly trying to find my bag. I must have looked like a lunatic! Finally my vision came back and I was able to grab my stuff and go. I found a set of stairs away from the crowds where I could sit with my head between my legs and chill out for a few minutes.

As I was sitting there I heard a voice say, ‘Simone?’

It was a gorgeous local girl named Kimberley, one of my Facebook followers, who was at the mall with her boyfriend. Having someone recognise me—even in the state I was in—put me in an awesome mood again and I temporarily forgot about how bad I was feeling. It was lovely to meet someone from the other side of the world who knew my story.

The rest of the day went smoothly, and that evening I had dinner with the media team. I knew that the following day was going to be full-on with various interviews, and of course my pre-surgery consultation with Dr Repta, where we would meet in real life for the first time.

The consultation the next day could not have gone better. He answered my questions—I only had about two—in such detail and so well that I felt as if I had never been in safer hands in my life.

I was standing there pretty much butt-naked while some guy I’d just met drew on me with a felt pen, and someone else caught the whole thing on camera!

After our chat Dr Repta did the pre-op markings, indicating where the various cuts were to be made and the skin removed. The Knoodle team filmed this part, too, which was kinda weird. I was standing there pretty much butt-naked while some guy I’d just met drew on me with a felt pen, and someone else caught the whole thing on camera!

Going into the surgery offices and meeting Dr Repta and the staff in the flesh really made things start to feel real. But I still wasn’t nervous; for me it was exciting seeing the doctor mark out what was actually going to be removed. All I wanted now was to see the results!

I did have an emotional moment later that day—I just needed to talk to my mum. It was so good hearing her voice, and she calmed me down instantly. I knew I would be able to get to sleep after that. And when I woke up in the morning, it was surgery day.

CHAPTER 26

I'M ALIVE!

I REMEMBER WAKING UP AND looking down. The first thing I thought was, *I've got boobs!* I could see them sitting there underneath the bandages, holding themselves up, not sagging and flattening out. I could tell straight away, even though they were in a compression bra, that my new breasts were going to look great.

I really didn't feel up to communicating with the world, but I knew that friends and family and my social-media followers would want to know that everything had gone well. Not long after I woke up in recovery, the Knoodle team took a photo of me doing a big thumbs-up, which I posted on Facebook with the caption: 'I'm alive!'

That night I also made a quick vlog, which was incredibly draining. But I had promised myself I would do live updates every day following the surgery, so I knew I had to start with day one, even though I was in a lot of pain.

It's pretty funny looking back at that video now and seeing how groggy I was—like I said, the vlogs make a great souvenir of a time that I might not remember too well otherwise.



Giving the thumbs-up for the camera after my surgery.

16.9.15 (10–12 hours after surgery: vlog)

Hi guys, how are you? So, this is approximately...10 or 12 hours after I've come out of surgery...and it's 4.30 a.m. I was released straight away into the care of a nurse [from a private nursing company] who drove me back to my hotel. She put me in a car with absolutely no air con, and when I asked to turn the air con on, it was boiling-hot air that came out. I thought I was going to pass out. The first thing she did when she drove out on the road was slam on the brakes, so I went flying forward and had to use my abs—which have just been cut—to try and brace myself. It was probably the worst pain ever [tearing up]. And for the entire drive home she kept doing the same thing: forward and back, forward and back. I was holding on for dear life. And I've got sore underarms

because I've had my breasts done. Honestly, I was in absolute agony! She decided to get off the motorway, where it's just a smooth straight line, and go through the suburbs where it was turns and bumps. I don't think she quite realised how much pain I was in.

We got back to the hotel, and she ended up falling asleep on the couch in here. So I've had no help for 10 or 12 hours, and I've had to pay for that and I've never been so f*cked off, ever, in my life! I don't know who I'm going to have to talk to tomorrow about that, because I thought that was just not on; not on at all.

Pain-wise, I'm in a lot of pain. Ranking it: the back is minimal, my breasts sort of feel tight and they're a bit uncomfortable under my arms when I move and pick up things, but it's the stomach that is *agony*. The stomach is constantly sore no matter how many pain meds I'm taking. But the results...you can see already, so despite the pain I'm just thinking of the results, and this will be so worth it.

What I can see is a little bit of boobs and—look, cleavage! The only other thing I can see, which I noticed when I went to the toilet...since I've gained weight and then started losing weight, I've had this bulge of fat and skin above my vagina, and it is *gone*. It's pulled up, and now I have an incredibly cool and nice-looking fanny! That is so exciting. Obviously I can't see anything else...my breasts or stomach yet, because it's all under the bandages and we're just not going there yet.

I've got a drain in [for removing the blood and other body fluid that collects in the surgical site] and I've emptied it twice already. The first time the measurement was 15 cc, the second time it was 25 cc. I've just got to record those as I do it, on the little bit of paper they've given me, in here.

My white sheets are *covered* in blood, so it looks like a crime scene right now but I think that's just normal, and the nurse said...I'm pretty sure she said that was normal, so I'm not too worried.

What else to report on? I'm not hungry at all...they gave me these little crackers that I'm meant to munch on. I'm meant to be cranking the water, so just drinking as much as possible. I've gone through three bottles of water so far, which in turn forces you to get up and go to the toilet about every hour. It gets you moving and your legs going and things like that, which stops all the blood clots. It's quite important to still be getting up, as much as you don't want to because the physical

pain of getting up and back down is what hurts the most. But I know I need to, so I'll keep doing that.

Sorry, my voice is a bit funny right now. I've had a breathing tube in so that's scratched it a bit...I mean it doesn't hurt now, it just feels a bit funny...other than that, I've told everyone I'm alive, basically. I got in touch with all my friends and family and I've had so many lovely messages come through, so that's been awesome.

I got to watch the news interviews I did beforehand for CBS, which were really fun to see. I was a bit worried, because obviously you can't wear any makeup pre-surgery, any jewellery, anything like that, no moisturiser even...and that was on national TV: me with not a bit of makeup on! I was sort of worried about how it would look, but when I watched it back I was actually quite pleased with myself.

I don't think there's anything else to update you on, other than that I *am* in a lot of pain. I'm coping, though, and I'm happy...I'm just so happy to see the results. That's it for now. Bye guys.

CHAPTER 27

THE ROAD TO RECOVERY

THE FIRST 24 HOURS WAS so tough. I was taking pain medication every four to six hours, and it was super-important to stay on top of it so that it didn't wear off. I tried to fit in sleep when I could, but I couldn't lie down properly—straightening out my abdominals would stretch the sutures, so I had to lie in a weird kind of banana shape, with my torso and legs propped up. I found that if I fell asleep and slipped down the bed, it was really hard to shuffle back up into the right position because I couldn't use my core muscles or my arms to push myself. I just had to sort of shove with my legs!

I was still feeling very emotional: a combination of a lack of sleep, not a lot of food and being in pain. But this was all I'd wanted for so long, and to finally have the surgery done was just the best feeling in the world.

I was taking so much pain medication that I was knocked out most of the time. I was allowed to take a dose every six hours, so I'd take the pills, sleep for five hours, then have a bit of awake time and maybe struggle to the toilet. Then I'd knock myself out again. For a couple of days I was in this weird state, going in and out of consciousness.

Looking back now, it was a freaky situation for me to be in: I was pretty much out of it, lying in a hotel room in a strange city thousands of kilometres from home, not really able to fend for myself. I should have taken someone with me, and I have certainly learned my lesson for any future surgeries I have.

BY THE SECOND DAY I was feeling a bit better. Day one had been an 11 out of 10 on the pain scale, but now I was down to about an eight or a nine.

I started getting a little bit of my appetite back, and one of the lovely Knoodle ladies, Sandra, brought me over some lunch. The wife of one of the other Knoodle marketers brought me a magazine and some flowers and fresh fruit, and soon I was feeling a bit more cheerful. I also got some lovely bouquets and of course many beautiful messages from friends and family in New Zealand.

Things slowly got better from that point. They changed my pain medication—although I didn't realise that I was supposed to stop taking the first drug before starting the second one, so initially I doped myself out pretty hard taking about three times the dose I should have been! Once that was sorted I began to feel a bit more normal.

When I had my first post-op consultation with Dr Repta, he found that a couple of sutures had popped out: some on my abdominal incision and some on the left-hand side of my bra-line back lift. He fixed those up and got me into a new body-binding garment, which kept everything in and helped to keep the swelling down. It had full pants that went right up under my breasts, with a holster over the shoulder so the pants couldn't roll down. I also had to wear a compression bra over my new boobs. There was a little hole for my drain (where all the pus, blood and other fluid oozed out of me) and a bigger gap between my legs so I could go to the toilet.

Dr Repta showed me the most incredible picture: his team had taken a photograph of the sections of skin they had cut off me.

On another of my early post-op visits, Dr Repta showed me the most incredible picture: his team had taken a photograph of the sections of skin they had cut off me. OMFG! They were laid out like wings, or like lumps of meat at the butcher—six of them. Two big ones came from my tummy, two medium-sized ones from my back, then two little flappy ones from my breasts. I thought it was fascinating. It was just astonishing to see how much skin had come off me, how carefully he had removed these sections, and how neatly they were cut. He hadn't been hacking and sawing away at me—it was very precise and obviously done with such care. (When I shared this pic on

Facebook, I had to put a ‘graphic content’ warning on it so that people wouldn’t just stumble upon the image. You have to click through to view it—it’s certainly not for the weak-stomached!)

When the skin is cut off it has to be separated from the muscle with a little tool that sort of seals the blood vessels underneath, so no wonder it hurt! I’d had that done all over the front of my stomach, my sides, and across a large section of my back.

ONCE I COULD GET OUT of bed, I was able to have my first proper look at my new body. I was still a bit swollen and lumpy, of course, but you could definitely see the results. I was blown away to see how small my waist was, and how my body curved out to my hips—I finally had the hourglass figure that women dream of! When I was big, I had known that I had a shape hiding under all my fat, but when I lost the weight that hourglass stayed hidden beneath all the folds of loose skin. It wasn’t until this point that it was finally revealed what a great figure I had.

There was still a lot of swelling, though, and my tummy was incredibly bloated. The compression bra and shorts helped to hold it all in and keep the swelling to a minimum.

I was allowed to have a shower by day four, which felt fantastic, although first I had to get all my undergarments off. Actually, getting them off wasn’t too tricky—the hard part was getting them back on. I had to do up two little hooks on the side of the compression garment, without moving my body around too much and upsetting the sutures. Manoeuvring myself into it was quite painful, but it was good to know that I could manage it all on my own. (Once again, it would have been so much easier if I’d had someone there with me!)

I’d been longing for a shower because I absolutely stank. I love having showers—I usually have two a day—so not being able to wash myself was torture. But up until this point I’d been feeling so faint every time I stood up that I wasn’t game to push it.

I’d been longing for a shower because I absolutely stank. I love having showers—I usually have two a day—so not being able to wash myself was torture.

Even on day four, I did start getting a bit light-headed when I was washing my hair. I didn't want to pass out and be found hours later, naked, under a cold shower, so I got out and sat on the end of the bed for a while until I came right.

Under my left breast there was quite a lot of dark bruising, and I couldn't raise my left arm as much as my right without feeling a burst of pain. I was glad I was still wearing the full-on binder, because my belly was impressively swollen. When I looked down I could see a big bulge, as if I were five months pregnant.

I would also like to add, for those who don't mind TMI, that it took me five days after surgery to produce a poo. Five days! And it was rock-solid, thanks to all the pain meds I had been taking. It hurt so badly to get out because I couldn't use my abdominal muscles to push it, so I tried to be as patient as possible and let it work its own way out! I felt so relieved when the deed was finally done. I was looking forward to getting off the pain meds and resuming my usual diet so my bowels could get back to normal. I certainly didn't want to go through that again!

Throughout this time, I didn't feel much like eating. The pain medication was probably affecting my appetite, and I was pretty uncomfortable around my stomach where all the muscles and skin had been cut. All I really fancied was fruit and smoothies.

I'VE ALSO GOT TO TELL YOU a funny story about something that happened one day in the hotel. It was super-hot that day and I had a hankering for a cold drink, so I decided to walk down the hall to get some ice from the ice machine. It was only a hundred metres or so down the corridor, so I thought it would be fine to walk down there in my compression gear. Putting clothes on over the top was going to be a hassle, especially when it was so hot. I took a peep outside my room and there weren't many people, so I headed off.

As I made my way down the hall I was getting a few smirks and smiles, and some of the tradesmen I passed started talking among themselves in Spanish. I was confused—I mean, I looked a bit weird, but surely not that bad?

It was only after I had filled my little ice bucket and was heading back that I glanced down. I had completely forgotten the fact that my compression

pants had that big gap at the bottom that allowed me to go to the toilet—so my vulva and bum were hanging out for everyone to see! I'd been thinking, *Oh, maybe they are finding it funny that I have just had surgery and I'm walking around with my tube on show or whatever.* No, no, no—it was because I was strolling along with all my bits on display for the builders and the grounds staff to look at!

I held the ice bucket down low and shuffled back to my room as quickly as my poor body could handle, then I locked the door and shut all the windows. I was mortified. I decided I wouldn't be going back out for a while!

CHAPTER 28

HEADING TO LA

I WAS LYING IN MY hotel bed late one morning, just taking it easy. I checked my emails and there was one from the producer of a daytime TV show called *FABLife*, asking me if I would be interested in appearing on it and being interviewed by the host, Tyra Banks. Would I? *Would I!* Tyra Banks is an amazing woman, and I was blown away to think that she had heard of me (or that her producers had, I suppose—anyway!).

I was beyond excited, and said yes without a moment's hesitation. It took a wee bit of organising: the producers wanted me to appear on the show before I went back to New Zealand, which didn't leave a very big window of time, and they were keen to have Dr Repta in the segment as well, so we had to coordinate all that with him and his schedule. For me it was the icing on the cake—having this life-changing surgery, and then being asked to appear on the TV show of one of the most famous and beautiful women in the world. Crazy!

The next thing I knew, just seven days after my surgery, I was in Los Angeles getting ready to appear on *FABLife*. It seemed so unreal. Who does this sort of thing happen to? Not a girl from little old New Zealand who decided to lose weight. But apparently, it does.

LEAVING PHOENIX WAS QUITE EMOTIONAL. I had my last post-op

appointment with Dr Repta, a few days early so that we both had time to fly to LA for Tyra's show. He checked all my surgical sites and said that everything was healing really nicely.

He also applied some Embrace scar-therapy dressings to the bra-lift scars on my back. They look like big see-through plasters, and they're put on over the scars to minimise their appearance. He taught me how to apply them myself, because the wounds on my abdomen and under my breasts were still too raw and moist.

My breasts were sitting quite high because of the swelling, so I was given another compression band to wear around my chest. This was designed to push my boobs down and give them that nice, natural tear-drop shape. At this stage I still had what looked like a 'double boob', with lots of bulging up the top, and that is never a good look.

Of course I didn't really feel like going anywhere or doing anything so soon after my surgery—especially not sitting on a plane—but my time was up, and home was calling to me. I had booked a few days in Hawaii on the way back, which I was starting to regret. All I really wanted to do was to get back home to my own bed. But the reservations were already made, and I had Tyra to meet first.

I had booked a few days in Hawaii on the way back, which I was starting to regret. All I really wanted to do was to get back home to my own bed.

THE FLIGHT TO LA ORGANISED by the producers was just under an hour—but first I had to struggle just to get on the damn plane! As I was going through security screening, I got pulled aside for a full pat-down because they could see bulges under my skirt. I was pretty emotional already, not to mention tired and in pain, and the last thing I needed was somebody man-handling me. I felt tears forming in my eyes, and I was worried it was going to make me look even more suspicious.

I quickly explained what I had been through and let them know that I was very sore, so when they did the pat-down they did it gently. It didn't hurt at all, and part of me was able to see the funny side. The security officers had spotted the surgical drainage tube bulging out in the pleats of my skirt and

decided it looked a bit abnormal—and they were right!

I ended up spending about an hour in a little room being checked out, and I soon lost patience. They wanted to know what every tube was for, and what was under all the compression, and they poked and prodded me . . . not a pleasant experience! Before long I was crying and crying, and it all seemed too hard. I'm not normally one to get fazed by things like this, but I was so totally over it that I just wanted to scream at them. But the more upset I got the longer it seemed to take, so I had to grit my teeth and get through it.

Get through it I did, and I felt pretty special when I got to LA and there was a private driver waiting for me in a Mercedes. He also collected my bags and carried them for me, which was a big help because I still wasn't able to lift much.

That evening I had dinner with Rosaria Cain, the Knoodle CEO, along with her husband and another member of the Knoodle team, Nicole. I'm so grateful for the time I spent with those guys; we all became friends on Facebook and promised to keep in touch. They really went above and beyond to take care of a little Kiwi girl so far from home—taking me out for meals and driving me around to my appointments, which they didn't have to do as part of our arrangement. The kindness of the Knoodle team was one of the things that got me through the whole process.

I WOKE UP THE NEXT DAY feeling totally disorientated; for the first time I didn't know where I was. I expected to be in my own bed for some reason—probably because it had been such a whirlwind decision to go to LA on the way home. The production company had put me up in the Culver Hotel in west Los Angeles, a beautiful, historic boutique hotel that was just across the road from The Culver Studios, where we would be filming.

The main part of the show would be filmed live, but they wanted to tape a 'pre-roll', which is the footage they'd use in the lead-up to my segment: 'This is Simone, who's coming up on the show . . .' It would be intercut with pictures and videos from my Instagram and Facebook, to give the viewers a bit of background. I had to do my own hair and makeup for this part, but I would get the full TV treatment when it came to the live section.

In person she is 10 times more beautiful than when you see her on screen: an incredibly tall, bronze goddess whose

personality shines out of her.

A member of the production team came and collected me from the hotel and walked me over to the studios. I got to meet Tyra for the first time, and she was *lovely*. She actually seemed to want to chat with me and get to know my story. From what I saw of her she made a real effort with everyone who was on the show. She was so genuine and so nice, both on and off camera—there was nothing put on when the cameras were rolling. It blew me away! And I have to say, in person she is 10 times more beautiful than when you see her on screen: an incredibly tall, bronze goddess whose personality shines out of her. She's so confident—and, yes, fabulous—that it's infectious. Being with her makes you feel amazing, too!



Filming the pre-roll for *FABLife*.

I met with the team behind the scenes, and was surprised to find it was a really friendly, laid-back environment. They sat me down with a researcher for a one-on-one chat, and she asked me lots of questions, delving deeper into the reasons for my original weight gain and how I had dealt with online bullying. The idea was to gather some more background information so they knew what questions to ask me on air the next day.

The whole experience felt like a dream. Just one day earlier I had been lying in a hotel room recovering from major surgery.

Being in the studio environment was amazing. As we walked around, I could see massive studios one after another, where multiple shows were being filmed at once. It was hectic—some people were practising lines and some were painting scenes and things like that. Just a whole different world, and very, very fast-paced, which stood out to me because I'd been doing bugger-all since my surgery. Going into a work environment where people were actually busy was a shock to the system!

The whole experience felt like a dream. Just one day earlier I had been lying in a hotel room recovering from major surgery—and I still had a drain sticking out of me. I was on so much pain medication that it kind of felt like a weird trip! It was so surreal that I frequently had to remind myself it was actually happening.

I got out of there at about midday, and decided to go for a little walk around the area. Culver City is about 8 km directly inland from Venice Beach, and there are lots of beautiful, historic buildings—the hotel where I was staying was nearly 100 years old. So I grabbed a smoothie and strolled around for about an hour, until I realised I was absolutely knackered. Back at the hotel, I feel asleep for three whole hours! In all the excitement of being in LA, I'd forgotten that even simple things like taking a walk were going to wipe me out. It was hard to find the right food, too, and I realised I'd had almost nothing to eat all day.

Although I was fizzing about my appearance on *FABLife*, part of me was really looking forward to heading home and getting back into a simple, healthy routine again.

CHAPTER 29

LIVING THE *FABLIFE*

ON THE DAY OF THE SHOW, the producers had told me to turn up ‘camera ready’, so being a practical Kiwi girl—and someone who loves getting glam—I did my hair and put on full makeup, ready to go. When I arrived at the studio they sent me through to the hair and makeup department, and the girls there just about fell off their chairs. They were really impressed with what I’d done—apparently ‘camera ready’ just means ‘don’t turn up with wet hair’, and they were expecting to have to do me up from scratch. We had a good laugh together when they asked me what I did for a living and I said, ‘I do hair and makeup, actually!’

Tyra met me backstage again for another chat. I’d missed out on going to wardrobe the day before, so she took me there to see if they could pick out something flattering that would hide all my compression garments. They had quite a struggle finding something that worked and was still young and fashionable. In the end they chose a black dress with shoulder cut-outs, which was actually really nice, but they paired it with a chunky blue necklace that was a little bit dated. On the upside, they put me in a gorgeous pair of black flats with pointed toes.

As I watched what I’d done I felt truly amazed for that person, as if I was seeing someone else’s story.

Before I went on, I watched the pre-roll that they had put together about me, and that was surreal. It was the first time I had seen my life and my journey spelled out like that. It was like watching another person, but at the same time I knew it was me. I started crying—I couldn't help it! As I watched what I'd done I felt truly amazed for that person, as if I was seeing someone else's story. (Like I said, I was on a lot of pain meds!) I felt so proud of what I knew I had achieved.

Walking out onto the set in front of a live audience was a thrilling experience. Someone opens the doors and tells you to go and everyone is clapping and all the lights and the cameras are pointed at you and . . . wow! I hadn't seen the set before so I didn't know what to expect, but the presenters all greeted me with big cuddles like I was a long-lost friend—which was a wee bit painful considering all the bandages I had on under my little black dress! But I was so happy and overwhelmed that I didn't care.

I sat there on the couch with Tyra and her co-hosts while they asked me about my journey and my experiences. Once we started talking I didn't feel nervous at all. It was just like having a chat—even if it was a chat with someone incredibly famous and beautiful, and her equally gorgeous friends!

As part of the segment, they got Tyra's co-host Joe Zee to do a 'style makeover' on me. He talked about how to dress when you're transitioning to a new weight, explaining how you could take what I was wearing and dress it up or down. He had me trying things on and assembling different looks on these mannequins, and at the end they gave me *every single piece*. I scored a Hugo Boss trench coat, a Calvin Klein white button-up shirt and all sorts of other things, as well as the outfit I was wearing. I was floored—I totally wasn't expecting that. Luckily they gave me a suitcase so I could get it all home, too, although having to wrangle an extra piece of luggage in and out of airports wasn't easy in my weakened state!

I have to say, it was one of the best days of my life. Tyra and her co-hosts were so down-to-earth, and no one seemed showy or 'Hollywood' at all. It was unbelievable. One of the other hosts, celebrity interior designer Lauren Makk, actually came up to me backstage and said 'I know who you are—I've been following you on Facebook.' Seriously?! Another crew member told me that she recognised me from reading about me online in the *Daily Mail*. It made me realise how small this world really is. Here I was in LA, being recognised for the little Facebook page I had set up for my friends in New Zealand.

Appearing on the show was honestly the coolest thing I've ever done. It was so much fun, and made me keen to have more involvement with television in the future, if I get the opportunity.

Then all of a sudden it was over. I went back to the hotel and had lunch with Dr Repta, glad for the chance to say goodbye and thank him again for everything he'd done for me. Then I had two hours to kill before I had to go to the airport. I'd already checked out of my room, so I headed for the lounge area downstairs and before you could blink I'd fallen asleep on the couch! A staff member came over and asked me if I was okay, so I explained about the surgery and she told me I could go on resting there until the car came to take me to the airport for my flight to Hawaii. It had been a huge, totally surreal, absolutely amazing day, but I was completely exhausted.

27.9.15

Woke up to a message from Mum saying 'Simone's Journey to Health Facebook page has just hit 100,000 followers!' I've never posted about the number of followers I have—I created the page to keep myself accountable and you guys are just a total bonus. But 100,000 is mind-blowing! I can't thank you enough for your continued support and kind words. If I'm having a low day, it's your comments and messages that push me through. We are in this together and what a fantastic little team we make! Celebration time!

WHEN I'D BOOKED MY TRAVEL, I thought having three days' 'holiday' in Hawaii on the way back to New Zealand was a great idea. When it came down to it, though, all I wanted to do was get home.

I was just so, so tired. After flying in late at night, I didn't wake up until about 9.30 a.m., and by the time I managed to pull myself out of bed it was midday. I was in a fair bit of pain, so I took my meds and lay in bed waiting for them to kick in. It was nice to be relaxing, but I felt guilty because I was in *Hawaii* and I wasn't even going outside.

Me being me, I did manage to fit some shopping in (had to go to Victoria's Secret to get some sexy lingerie for my new body!), but I needed another

nana nap as soon as I was done. That first night I felt pretty sorry for myself: all I could find to have for dinner was a Lean Gourmet pasta dinner, which was only 250 calories. When I checked the ingredients list I could see that it was full of crap, but I didn't have the energy to walk anywhere and find something healthy. So it was that and a zero-calorie sparkling mango juice. Woohoo. Party for one in my hotel room!

That night was particularly tough because it was my littlest brother Jackson's 21st birthday, and I was sitting in a hotel room 7000 km away instead of celebrating with him. All I wanted to do was give him a cuddle. I had written him a speech that my aunty was going to read out for me, but I hated that I couldn't be there. I posted an emotional YouTube video and threw myself a bit of a pity party.

One of Jackson's best friends Skyped me into the speeches, so I got to watch about half an hour of those and see the cake being cut and the key handed over. I felt sort of included, which was awesome, but it still made me feel homesick. Aunty Jodi did me proud—not only did she read out my speech, she took the boys out in town and showed them a wicked good time that ended in a strip club at 4 a.m.! So at least someone did my duty for me!



The view from my hotel room in Hawaii. If only I'd been able to go swimming!



My shopping trip to Victoria's Secret.

I MANAGED TO GO AND have a look at Waikiki Beach, which was just as beautiful as I had imagined. I got to dig my toes into the gorgeous white sand, but it was torture not being able to go for a swim.

By the morning of my last day in Hawaii, 12 days after surgery, I was finally beginning to feel like myself again. I was able to take a shower without getting light-headed, and my appetite seemed to be returning. I started cutting back on the pain meds that day, and I found that I didn't need a daytime sleep anymore.

One thing that I was really looking forward to about going home was giving my compression bra and high-waisted pants a good wash. I had been wearing them almost continually since my surgery, without the facilities to wash and dry them quickly enough to get them back on before the swelling got too bad. I couldn't wait to get home and sort my shit out. Living out of suitcases had been a nightmare.

I was desperate to start working again as well. On my last day in Hawaii my bank account was down to about \$34. I just had to hope that it would be enough to get me to the airport! I'd had to borrow money from Jess to survive the last few days, because the nursing fees and medication had cost a lot more

than expected. With a bad exchange rate in the mix, I was flat broke. At least I knew Jess was coming to pick me up from the airport in Auckland, so I wouldn't have to walk home!

29.9.15

If you don't live on the edge, you can't see the view.

I took a huge leap of faith deciding to come to America and put my life in the hands of a surgeon who reached out to me. I didn't know what was ahead of me then, but I stayed positive and it has paid off.

Today is the last leg of what I can honestly say has been the trip of a lifetime. I'm not coming back the same Simone: this is the 2.0 version and she's ready to tackle anything that comes her way. I want to take a moment to thank each and every one of you: friends, family, followers, the team at Knoodle, and of course Dr Repta for turning my wildest dreams into a reality. I will be eternally thankful, and there are not enough words in this world to fully express how grateful I am. New Zealand-bound in a few hours!

CHAPTER 30

HOME AT LAST

FOR THE WHOLE NINE HOURS of the flight between Honolulu and Auckland, I was thinking, *I just wanna be home, I wanna be home, I wanna be home*. When that plane landed, oh my God, I was over the moon! Naturally my bags were the last to come out on the carousel, but as soon as they appeared I grabbed them and ran as fast as my body would let me out into the arrivals area. There I found all my closest friends waiting for me, holding ‘Welcome home’ signs and balloons. It made me feel so special—so, so good to be home and in the company of loved ones.

My friends were happy to see me, but one thing they did say was, ‘God, you’re looking skinny!’ With the excess skin gone my body was clearly a bit different, but I realised my face was looking quite gaunt, too. I hadn’t had much of an appetite the whole time I was in America—the only things I ever felt like were fruit juices and smoothies, so I’d unintentionally been on a juice diet.

After a full day of eating normally back at home, I jumped on the scales and found that I weighed 79.9 kg, which is the lightest I’d been since I was 13. So my friends were right: I was at my absolute skinniest.

Funnily enough, I didn’t feel that good about it. I didn’t want to look sick or gaunt; I wanted to look healthy and sexy. I decided I would pump up the protein and try to get my weight up to around 81 kg, where I feel I’m meant to be. There’s no point in having a banging body if you look or feel too sick

to be out there working it!

BEING HOME AND BACK IN my own bed again was pure bliss. I really needed to get moving on that washing, though; almost everything I'd taken with me was covered in blood. I'd ruined so many of my beautiful nightgowns—after a week crumpled up in my luggage, there was no way the blood stains were coming out of those!

It was nice to have support around me as well; people who knew me and wanted to help me. It made me realise how much I had missed having my loved ones near during my surgery and recovery. Jess welcomed me home like a sister and took great care of me over the next few days.

29.9.15 (vlog)

I got home about half an hour ago and I've unpacked everything and put it all away, so I'm feeling very organised. I put on a white load and I just heard the machine finish beeping now, which means I can put on a dark load with all my compression gear and wash it for the first time. I'm so excited for that!

Honestly, there's nothing else to report on. I'll keep this one really short and sharp. I'm feeling so glad to be home, so grateful to be home, and I'm going to try to get some sleep. Night, guys.

THE NEXT DAY IT WAS time to catch up with family, so I went around to my grandparents' house. My cousins Jamie Rose and Maddy were there, too, and Mum lives just around the corner, so she came over with my Aunty Sonia. Each new person wanted to see my new body, and each time I had to take the compression garments off and show them the scars and how it was all looking.

Even poor old Grandad had to have a look, and he came back with the opinion, 'Yeah, you've got good boobs now, Simone, good boobs.' It was a very funny conversation to be having with my grandfather, but it was nice to know that everyone thought my new body looked fantastic, which I kind of

needed to hear. I was pretty pleased with the result myself but it was good to get some outside confirmation that yes, I was looking great!

Despite having a busy day being up and about, seeing people and getting myself sorted, I didn't feel tired once. I could do everything I wanted to do—I just had to take it slowly, especially when it came to standing up and sitting down. I even went for an hour-long walk, which wouldn't have seemed possible even two days earlier. I had started to believe that the pain was going to hang around forever, so it was a relief to be feeling more like myself again.

I'd been told I couldn't exercise or do any heavy lifting for at least six weeks, which was quite restricting for a gym junkie who works as a nanny to small kids! But I knew I had to take it easy to have the best possible chance of recovery. I was lucky with the timing because it was school holidays, so I had the rest of the week off nannying and was able to take things slowly at first.

I re-watched the instructional video he'd sent me and decided to make a little video of my own: me removing my own drain.

Because I was now half a world away from my surgeon and his team, I was basically on my own in terms of my recovery. Dr Repta had shown me how to remove my surgical drain, which I was allowed to do once the amount of fluid coming out had reduced to a certain level. It was now down to fewer than 15 ml a day, so I decided it would be okay to pull the drain out. I thought about getting my grandmother to do it, because she used to be a nurse, but then I re-watched the instructional video Dr Repta had sent me and decided to make a little video of my own: me removing my own drain.

It was pretty easy. I just had to snip my own stitches (see, I told you I was tough!) and *whoosh*, out it came! I did get a bit of an infection in the drain site a few days later, but I asked Dr Repta for his advice over Skype, and it cleared up once I got some antibiotics from my GP.

It might seem a bit strange that I was sharing all this stuff online, but the recovery had been far more painful than I expected, and I really wanted my vlogs and posts to be of use to other people considering going down this path. My advice to someone facing similar surgery would be to take as much time off as possible, do as little as possible, and have as much support and care

around you as you can muster. It is major surgery and the recovery is significant.

It might seem a bit strange that I was sharing all this stuff online, but the recovery had been far more painful than I expected, and I really wanted my vlogs and posts to be of use to other people.

And because I had promised to share everything, I had to tell my followers about another funny compression-gear moment—well, funny in hindsight. I had been dying to get a fake tan, but it meant going without my compression gear for a few hours afterwards—a bit naughty of me but I decided it would be fine. I didn't even wear a bra, just a skimpy pair of knickers under a jumpsuit.

The problem came when I headed off for a business meeting afterwards. I nipped to the loo and found I couldn't unzip the back of my jumpsuit, so I thought I'd just pull it across and go to the toilet through the slit in the compression gear. Wrong! I'd got so used to wearing the gear, I'd forgotten that I didn't have it on. I started weeing and thought it felt really weird . . . then I realised I had actually wet myself.

It was just before my meeting, so I had to dry myself as best I could without wiping off the fake tan, then go to a business meeting with wet knickers! Whoever said my life was glamorous?

CHAPTER 31

GETTING BACK INTO IT

NOT BEING ABLE TO GO to the gym or do any serious exercise for those first six weeks was incredibly hard. Everything in me wanted to get back in there and start smashing out the workouts, but I knew I couldn't. I felt so lazy and disgusting when I wasn't getting my usual dose of physical activity. I had got used to the huge rush that daily workouts gave me, and my body really missed those endorphins. I was allowed to walk, so I tried to do that every day, but it wasn't the same. I tried to focus on my nutrition and remind myself that it was mostly a mental game. I was still on track with maintaining my healthy weight.

The pain became a lot more bearable in the weeks after I got home. My movement was still limited, but each day it got better and better, and the sharp twinges I got when I twisted or bent over started to fade away. By the time I'd been home for a couple of weeks the pain was pretty much gone, although I still tended to hunch over—it took a long while before I felt comfortable standing up straight and stretching out my whole abdominal area.

Unfortunately, I had heaps of trouble with the Embrace scar-therapy patches—they weren't waterproof, so they would come off every time I had a shower (and I told you I am a shower fanatic!). In the end I decided just to leave the scars alone to heal. As it turned out, they faded beautifully, but at the time I told myself that even if they didn't, they were part of my story and

I would wear them with pride.

About three weeks after I got home my tummy started to swell up, and it got to the point that I looked as if I was pregnant. I wondered if it was because I had taken my drain out too soon and I messaged Dr Repta, freaking out. I sent him more info and some pictures and he told me not to worry—it wasn't fluid, I was just really bloated. Apparently this is another potential side effect of the surgery, and it can last up to three months! I wasn't that happy about it because the swelling was quite uncomfortable, and I was no longer on any pain meds. So I was feeling a bit sorry for myself all round.

I was also feeling bummed because I'd realised that there was no way I was going to be able to do the half-marathon I had been training for prior to my surgery. Before I went away I had been kinda hoping that I would recover in time to fit in three or four weeks of running before the event in late October. But it soon became clear that I wasn't even going to be able to jog until about two days before the event, so I had to pull the plug. I decided I would look out for another half-marathon somewhere outside Auckland over the summer, so I could give myself a bit of time to train for it. As it's turned out, I still haven't managed to do one (well, not so far anyway—never say never), because each time I've entered something major has come up to prevent me from taking part. Maybe this is the universe trying to tell me something?

IN THE END IT WAS only four weeks after surgery when I gave in to my urges and hit the gym. I just couldn't stop myself. I'd had a bad day and all I wanted to do was exercise (a far cry from the girl who once would have blobbed on the couch and eaten a burger!). My body had been feeling good all week and I wasn't in any pain, and I was desperate for some decent exercise.

I focused mainly on cardio, spending some time on the bike, treadmill and rower, and then I did a really light weight session—and by light, I mean I stuck to the load I'd been told I was allowed to carry, which was only about 2 kg in each hand.

There were moments when it wasn't that comfortable, but each time my body started to hurt I stopped exercising, or switched what I was doing. I just needed that endorphin hit so badly! And it made me feel so much better; the difference in my mood was remarkable.

It felt so right being back in that gym environment and getting pumped up. The only hard thing was looking around and seeing all the other gym-goers lifting much heavier weights. I was wishing I could do the same, but I knew I had to take it easy and not undo all Dr Repta's good work.

A couple of weeks later I was running on the treadmill for an hour each day, followed by an hour's weight training or a group fitness class. I also resumed my PT workouts with Nicole. It had been seven weeks since we'd had a session, and it was a total reality check: I had lost *a lot* of muscle. The amount I could lift had dropped massively, I couldn't do nearly as many reps, and I stumbled down the stairs afterwards like a newborn foal.

It had been seven weeks since we'd had a session, and it was a total reality check: I had lost *a lot* of muscle.

I knew it was going to take a lot of work to get back to where I had been, but I felt ready for the challenge.

By early December, three months after my surgery, I was back competing in an ocean swim, doing the Harbour Crossing event again in Auckland. I knocked three minutes off my time from the previous year, completing it in an hour and eight minutes despite the fact I'd had a nasty tummy bug in the 24 hours beforehand.

While some things about the swim were much easier—I wasn't worried about all the other swimmers in the water, and I didn't have to argue in my head about whether or not I would survive—it was quite hard work, because I still felt as if I couldn't fully stretch out my body. Swimming overarm is a very core-intensive exercise, and my core was a bit shaky from being cut up so recently!



Back in the gym in December 2015, a few weeks after my surgery.

I was clearly getting fitter again, though, and in terms of my journey I was a long way ahead of where I had been a year earlier.

I KNEW THAT ONCE I HAD recovered from the surgery I would need some new goals. The big one was getting my fitness back, and I set myself some targets at the gym. In a way it seemed as if I was back to square one. I had been so fit and strong, and now I was as weak as a kitten. I had nothing left in me—I could lift only about an eighth of what I had been lifting before. Seeing my strength completely deteriorate was depressing: I felt like I'd done all this work and now I was back to almost nothing.

But there was another way to look at it: I could start working on the body that I'd dreamed of having for so long, and that was exciting. I never took the view that I had arrived at an end point. Yes, I'd lost the weight, and yes, I'd had the skin-removal surgery, but there was so much that lay ahead of me,

and my first task was getting my fitness back to where it had been before I went to America. My body was going to be a constant work in progress. With fitness, you're never exactly where you want to be; you don't suddenly say, 'Oh, I'm fit enough, I'll just stop now.' You're always setting a new goal: a heavier weight or more reps or a longer run. That's what's great about exercise—it's never finished. So I was eager to crack into it and to move on with the next chapter of my life.

I was also getting an inkling of where my future career might lie. Although I loved nannyng and the children I looked after, and I hadn't lost my passion for doing hair and makeup, it was starting to look like there might be something in this social-media thing—something more than just keeping a record of my journey for those who wanted to follow me.

I was also getting an inkling of where my future career might lie. It was starting to look like there might be something in this social-media thing—something more than just keeping a record of my journey.

One of the first big opportunities that came my way was being a judge for the Cleo Rimmel London Model Search in January 2016. A few companies had been approaching me to work with them on events or to promote their products, but the model search was the first gig I'd been offered that was actually a proper job, for which I would be paid—and not just in free products.

The events were held over three weekends, in Auckland, Wellington and Christchurch, which meant I could still nanny during the week. (Nannyng is almost like parenting—you can't just take a day off when you need to. Any leave has to be arranged months in advance. Sometimes I asked my grandmother to cover for me, if an opportunity came up that I really wanted to pursue, but those kids and my regular income remained my main priority.) I was part of a panel of four judges, and at each event we would meet the girls and ask them questions about why they wanted to get into modelling.



A tile of images I shared on my Facebook page to promote the Cleo Rimmel London Model Search 2016.



Filming a promo clip for the model search in 2016. I'm pictured with (from left) two of my fellow judges, *Cleo* editor Danielle Lagos and model agent Ngahuia Williams, and the 2015 winner, Amy Tomlinson. Image by Cleo Rimmel London Model Search.

It was crazy—rewind 18 months and I would never have imagined that I'd be travelling around the country selecting models! And even more crazy: some of the girls who entered told me that they'd come along just to meet me, because they'd been following my journey online. The job turned out to be more than a way of making money; it was a way of getting in touch with my followers and increasing my reach.

Some of the girls who entered told me that they'd come along just to meet me, because they'd been following my journey online.

Around this time I also did my first public speaking event, through the Novotel in Christchurch, with Sera Lilly from Fat 2 Fit. That was terrifying for me—it was my first time addressing a room full of people about what I'd been through, instead of just 'talking' through my computer or being interviewed by a pro. I had to come up with a slideshow of images and speak for an hour and a half—which is a long time to chat about yourself!

Despite my nerves, it was a pretty buzzy experience. And after delivering my speech, I got to meet so many amazing women from the audience—some had been through similar weight loss, and some were still very overweight and were looking for inspiration. It was great to connect with them directly and hear their stories. I met one girl who had changed her life after following my journey, which was very humbling. We were both in tears: she was so excited to meet me and I was so moved by her story.

These experiences made me start to wonder if there was a career for me in social media. Up until that point I hadn't realised that turning it into a job was even a thing! The model search gave me my first big pay cheque—and I thought, *Wow, if these opportunities keep coming up I could potentially make a living doing this kind of thing.*

CHAPTER 32

SOULMATE

ON 1 NOVEMBER 2015 something very significant happened to me: I met my boyfriend, Trent.

Like many modern couples, we connected through Tinder. I had decided a few weeks earlier that I would start dating again. I'd had my year of self-imposed exile during my weight-loss journey, I was well on the way to recovering from the skin-removal surgery and I felt it was time to get back out there. I had been on this lengthy journey of self-discovery and self-love, and I finally felt that I had reached a point where I could say I loved myself through and through, and I was ready to love someone else.

Being a highly organised and goal-oriented person, I did Tinder hard: I was determined to get out there and meet as many guys as I could. I went on three or four dates a week, powering through them and quickly establishing that none of the guys were for me. I got sick of this pretty fast—there was too much effort for too little reward!—so I deleted the app from my phone.

But there was one guy I must have given my mobile number to, because he sent me a text.

'Hey, we've been messaging on Tinder, I'd love to take you out on a date.'

What the hell, I thought, *one more date won't hurt*. And we arranged to meet up one Sunday.

I felt sick with nerves—I had no idea what this guy looked

like, how old he was or what he did, and no way to find out more about him since I'd deleted the app.

When Sunday rolled around I felt sick with nerves—I had no idea what this guy looked like, how old he was or what he did, and no way to find out more about him since I'd deleted the app. When he messaged me to say, 'Are we still on for tonight?', I remember thinking, *What excuse can I come up with to get out of this?*

I told him I wasn't feeling well, and he said that was fine but he would still love to go on a date with me when I was better. Persistent! So I agreed to meet him the following week, thinking I could get out of it later if I had to. And when it came to date day I still didn't like the idea, so I pulled out *again!* It just felt too blind-datey, and I wasn't in the mood. I thought to myself, *He won't try a third time, so I'm safe.* Well, I was wrong.

He did go a bit cold when I cancelled the second date but, as luck would have it, we had a mutual friend who told him that I wasn't actually a total flake and it was worth giving me another chance. So he messaged me again, and once again we arranged to meet on a Sunday. And once again, when the day came I didn't really want to go. But this time I told myself I couldn't be that much of a bitch. I decided that I had to suck it up—go along, meet the guy, say hi and get out of there.

Straight away, this date was different. When he came to pick me up from my apartment, he walked me to the car and opened the door for me—just little things that no one else had done on any of my other dates. He was so sweet and nice, I found myself warming to him.

The first thing I discovered was that he was only 20! I was 25 at the time, so the age gap felt a bit weird, but nothing about him seemed that young. He was very mature, so that worry faded very quickly.

We had so much fun on that first date. Straight away we got on like really good friends, laughing and nudging one another.

On our date he took me tenpin bowling, which was another pleasant surprise. He'd told me that I needed to bring a pair of socks and a banana,

which really raised my eyebrows—I thought perhaps we were going hiking, so I wore jeans and (for once!) flat shoes.

We had so much fun on that first date. Straight away we got on like really good friends, laughing and nudging one another. We even had a little kiss—just a casual peck on the lips at the bowling alley. When he dropped me home and I went inside, Jess’s first question was, ‘What was the banana for?’ I realised I had forgotten to ask!

He messaged me not long after he’d dropped me off: ‘I really loved getting to know you, I’ve had an amazing night, I’d love to see you again.’

Once again, that was something none of my other Tinder dates had bothered doing. He seemed so genuine and not into playing games—he liked me and he wanted to see me again, and he wasn’t afraid to say so.

I messaged him back, saying I’d really enjoyed our night, too—and, oh, what was the banana for?

‘It was just to throw you off track,’ he replied. That made me laugh—he’d been trying to keep me guessing about what we might do on our date, and I loved that. I also respected the fact that he hadn’t just taken me out for a drink or, worse, to a movie—he’d chosen a setting where we could really get to know one another.

The next day he offered to cook me dinner, so I went around to his place and met his flatmates before taking a walk with him up to the top of One Tree Hill. He’d cooked a prawn dish with pasta. I could only eat about two mouthfuls of the pasta, because at this stage my diet was still mostly protein and not many carbs. He was afraid I didn’t like what he’d made, so I had some explaining to do—and, as you know from reading this far, it was quite a story to tell!

He didn’t know anything about my background when we met, so it all came out over the course of our next few dates. It was refreshing to go out with someone who didn’t know anything about me, because I had been on dates with guys who knew the whole story and they seemed to have formed a view of me from my online profile. Trent was interested in me for me, not the public face of me.



On the beach with my number-one on Valentine's Day 2018.

Because Trent had organised our first two dates, I felt that it was my turn to do something, so I arranged for us to go on another walking date. We ended up watching a movie in bed, and our relationship just carried on from there. Since that third date we have hardly spent a day apart, except the times when I have had to travel for work.

At first I tried to keep him out of the spotlight, but he was happy to be my social-media sidekick. Initially, I don't think he took it that seriously. If I asked him to take a photo for me and it took 20 minutes to get the right shot, he'd think it was such a waste of time. 'What does it matter how you look?' he'd say, or, 'Who cares what the food looks like? I just want to eat it while

it's still hot!'

These days Trent helps me a lot—he has learned to operate the digital SLR camera and he's done some photoshoots with me. He has even been out on full shoot days to learn how to use the camera in different conditions. He's a really good sport. I don't think photography is something he particularly loves, but he's happy to do it because it's helping me out and creating good content.

And now when we're making dinner, it'll be him who says to me, 'Are we taking a photo of this one? Does it need to be pretty?'

CHAPTER 33

JOURNEYTOHEALTH.CO.NZ

WHILE FACEBOOK HAD BEEN THE ideal channel for me during my weight-loss journey, and I had amassed a huge number of followers—more than 100,000 and growing all the time—it was becoming clear that I needed to branch out. The idea for my website came about mainly because of the response I was getting every time I put up a food-related post on Facebook. I would try to include as much information about each dish as I could, including how to prepare it, but space was limited. People were always asking for more in-depth recipes and extra details, so I decided to set up a website where I could share more information. On social media, people are looking for a short little post, but on a website I could go into detail for those who wanted it. I could add more images and better descriptions of the things I was doing. If Trent and I went away for a weekend, for example, I usually posted a couple of snapshots and a few sentences on Facebook. On the blog site I could write about activities we'd tried or places we'd eaten, and provide a much fuller picture for people who were interested.

My other motivation was a feeling that had been growing in me. I had come so far on my own personal journey, and I felt that it was time to flip things around and give something back. I wanted to help others as much as possible, and to create useful content that my followers could apply to their own journeys to health. The website would feature my story, of course, but I also wanted to post material on beauty, nutrition and fitness.

As I often do when I need some guidance, I turned to the Facebook community. I wrote a post asking if anyone could help me out with web and logo design. I didn't want to risk doing it myself and having it look amateur! I was lucky: a friend put up his hand and offered to design my website and all my branding. He really took it to another level, and made it super-easy for me to update and upload content, which means I can manage it all myself.

That was the start of journeytohealth.co.nz, which is now my central hub for information about me and my journey, and about health and wellbeing—including recipes, which continues to be one of the most popular categories.

I also found myself expanding my social-media channels. I now have Instagram, YouTube and Snapchat accounts, although my focus is moving away from Snapchat and I'm concentrating more on Instagram Stories.

I do all my Facebook and social-media posts myself—none of it is farmed out or done by an assistant. My typical content is very much what I get up to in my everyday life. I don't think too hard about what I'm going to post, other than saying to myself, *I'm going to this event so I know there'll be an outfit photo*, or, *Wow, my lunch looks great, let's share that*. I've never had a hard-and-fast rule that I need to share something every day, but it generally works out that I do: most days I'll post *at least* once, just because things happen. I also try to do a recipe post about once a fortnight, and these days I have a variety of sponsored content that goes out there, too (more on that soon).

I do all my Facebook and social-media posts myself—none of it is farmed out or done by an assistant. My typical content is very much what I get up to in my everyday life.

I don't have a set schedule for when I post, either—I never think about prime times or having to release something at a certain point. If I'm making my lunch and it looks good I post it there and then; I don't think, *Oh, I've got followers in America so I need to do it at a different time*. My social-media persona is still just me being me. If I get only two likes that's great as far as I'm concerned—I posted what I wanted to post so I'm happy.

In fact, I can't imagine there ever, ever being a point when my social-media channels are not me being me. And I don't ever want to have someone else replying from my page to my personal messages. The messages I receive

are not just, ‘Hi, you’re cool, bye.’ Many people share their in-depth feelings, their stories, their heartbreak, their eating disorders, their abusive partners; everything that’s led them to where they are today. Those people are reaching out to *me*, because I have shared my life with *them*, and I think it would be mortifying for them to think that someone else was reading those messages. Sometimes it can take me a while to get back to everyone, but I spend time every day working on responding, because it’s important to me.

Aside from Facebook, I am loving using Instagram Stories—it’s a great way to share more of my day. But if I kept putting the things I post on Instagram on my Facebook page, pretty soon I’d have no followers! I use it to share the more mundane parts of my day—what I’ve been up to; how I’m feeling, good or bad; what’s on my mind. It’s an easy way to express myself, and because the stories are in video form I can just talk off the top of my head. It’s not like a YouTube video that I have to plan and edit—it’s a quick insight into my thoughts there and then.

Each video is only 10–15 seconds long, and all up I record about five minutes a day. It’s a way to help my followers get to know me a bit better. They can reply to me instantly when I say something, and I can ask them direct questions and get immediate responses, too. I can also follow what they’re doing, and check out their posts and stories, so I get to know them a little, which is really nice. I’ve got about a hundred really avid followers who respond to everything I do, and give me really positive feedback.

I truly mean it when I say that I’m not doing all this because it’s a job—even though much of it *is* a job now. I do it because I still love it. The day it feels like hard work is the day I’ll stop. I hope that day never comes, because social media is such a fun, cool industry. I’m incredibly grateful to be where I am today, with more than 300,000 followers on Facebook, 250,000 on Instagram and more than 2.3 *million* views on YouTube. And I did it because I wanted to do it, and because I like connecting with people and helping them out.

The day it feels like hard work is the day I’ll stop. I hope that day never comes, because social media is such a fun, cool industry.

The one social-media channel I’ve never really got into is Twitter. I

downloaded it once—I was thinking, *If I do social media, I should do all of social media*—but it just didn't click with me. I didn't enjoy it or get anything from it. All the other platforms I was using felt very natural to me, so I wasn't keen to be involved with one that felt forced, or one where I felt I had to come up with funny things to say all the time.

I think Twitter is best for people with a very witty sense of humour, or those who've got controversial things to say, and that's just not me. I'm not super-witty on the spot, I'm not controversial, and I'm not into voicing a polarising opinion just to get a reaction or provoke my followers. I'm sure it can be a fantastic tool to get people thinking about a topic, but I don't need to be making provocative comments just so others will retweet or respond. I'm not Donald Trump—I don't need to engage with the world that way!

OF COURSE, THERE IS A downside to social media. The internet is full of trolls and people who want to pull you down by posting hateful comments. It's something that happens over and over—at least once a week in my case. It took me a long time to get used to it. For ages it didn't seem to be getting any easier to deal with, and I found that I was constantly justifying myself and my actions to people who didn't even know me.

The thing that used to wind me up was that these people seemed to think they knew everything about me, when of course only the tiniest percentage of my day gets posted on social media. I couldn't believe how severely some people were willing to judge me, based on those little snippets.

Each negative comment would bring me down and make me re-evaluate what I'd posted over and over again. It took me a long time to understand that if people are commenting so harshly on your looks or something you've done, then it's not about you, it's about them. They're clearly not very happy in themselves, so they try to pull others down to their level.

Looking at it that way helped me deal with it. I tried to think of the haters as unhappy people, and decided that I would pity them rather than reflecting their hate and anger back at them. With that attitude, I have found that the nasty comments and attacks don't hurt me so much anymore. The people who told me it would get easier were right. With time, I have found coping mechanisms that work for me.

I tried to think of the haters as unhappy people, and

decided that I would pity them rather than reflecting their hate and anger back at them.

For me, the best thing to do is to hide the comment, rather than deleting it. That way, the person still thinks it's there and doesn't come back with a second, even nastier post. It takes the comment off my radar, so I don't re-read it or think about it anymore—it's gone. It's something I don't need to see.

Another good reason for hiding these posts is to protect my followers. Sometimes they'll try to back me up and they'll get torn to shreds as well—and that's the last thing they deserve. I don't want the lovely people who follow me to be attacked, and for it all to fester into a big hate feed.

What's really amusing, though, is that a lot of these trolls must be interested in my page in some way, because they'll often comment more than once. You'd think if I really annoyed them, they'd just stop looking at my page!

18.12.17

There are days when I find the nasty comments and hatred all too much, and I want to hide away and never face social media again. But then just one message will remind me how powerful this platform and my voice can be. If I can change even just one more life, I will happily be called any name under the sun, knowing that what I have to share is far more important than any nasty words a keyboard warrior can say to me.

CHAPTER 34

MAKING IT MY CAREER

ABOUT 18 MONTHS AFTER ACHIEVING my goal weight, I had reached the point where social media and my public presence were becoming the predominant force in my life. I had realised how seriously people were taking my posting and blogging: wanting to know my opinion and taking my advice. I felt a huge responsibility to provide my followers with quality content, and I also had a growing sense of what my public persona represented. While most of my life took place away from the screen, there were definitely expectations of Simone Anderson the social influencer in terms of how she should behave and the things she should and shouldn't say. But at the same time it was exciting: I had created this world out of nothing, through my own hard work—not only by losing the weight in the first place but by establishing a 'brand', if you like, and working hard to maintain it.

By the end of 2016, I was being offered so many cool opportunities that it was getting harder and harder to juggle my social-media life with nannying. My commitments to my nanny family meant that I couldn't do events during the week, so I was having to turn things down. And in order to fit everything in, all my evenings and weekends were spent working, either doing hair and makeup or working on my webpage and various channels.

I still adored nannying and it had been my passion for the previous 10 years, but I had to make a choice: do I continue with my nannying and the security of a steady income and let my new business get squeezed, or do I

transition into a career of my own, one that could potentially sustain me for life? It was a really hard decision to make.

I was on the right track, I had made the right decision, and it was going to work for me if I put all my energy into it.

At that point I wasn't making enough money to support myself through social media alone—the amount I was earning was on the verge, but not quite enough. However, the very day I stopped nannying, two massive social-media deals came through. The work only took me a couple of hours, and I made more money than I would have earned in three months of nannying.

For me, it was a clear sign that I'd done the right thing. I was on the right track, I had made the right decision, and it was going to work for me if I put all my energy into it.

I had been doing sponsored posts on my Facebook page for a while, but in the beginning it was mostly in exchange for free stuff. Companies would contact me and ask me to try their new product and mention it on my page, and if it was something I liked I said yes. I really had no idea that what I was doing was worth so much to these companies.

I remember writing a post about some workout pants in exchange for a pair, and the lady came back to me and said, 'Oh, you sold 180 pairs of those pants for us.' And something finally clicked in my head when she said that. I talked to my godmother, and she told me I had to stop posting for free. 'You're making massive amounts of money for these companies in exchange for a twenty-dollar pair of pants, and that's not fair,' she pointed out.

I guess I hadn't recognised my own value at that stage. I still had the mindset that I was maintaining my Facebook page for myself—as my own personal record—but it had become much bigger than that.

After talking to some other people in the industry to get an idea what the going rate was, I decided on a fee that seemed like pretty good money—it would have taken me half a week of nannying to earn that much! But then I got chatting to someone in the business, and she said to me, 'Honestly, the reason that so many companies are coming to you is because your rate is so cheap!' She reckoned my fee was about an eighth of what it should be.

So I tripled my rate per post, but for a long time I couldn't bring myself to put it up any further. I was finding that side of things really hard; pushing

myself forward and trying to get money for my posts did not come naturally to me. I tried to gauge the right amount by how people reacted: if they didn't blink an eyelid, apparently I wasn't charging enough! I can sell myself in certain areas—where I know what I am worth—but when it came to asking for money in exchange for promoting things, I just felt that I was out of my depth. I was really, really struggling.

I had five or six management agencies approach me about working together, but none of them felt like a good fit. They didn't see any longevity in my career, beyond continuing to post online until I stopped being flavour of the month. That seemed to be all they wanted from me: a short-term relationship that could be best described as, 'How much can we make from this person for the tiny period of time before she disappears?'

Then I had a meeting with Outspoken by Odd, and they were completely different to the other agencies—they wanted more for me. They wanted everything I wanted: a career beyond social media, emceeing, public speaking—the works. They saw those things in my future and knew they could get me there. Talking to Outspoken made me really excited for what my career could be and what we could turn it into, pushing the boundaries and taking it further.

I signed with them on the spot, and I have to say it was one of the best decisions I have ever made. They've taken so much of my workload off me, especially all the back-and-forthing and negotiating—all the stuff I wasn't particularly good at and didn't enjoy doing. In the past, I'd had clients who weren't satisfied with what I was planning to say about their product, and I'd spend hours and hours rewriting the post to try to please them. Now my management deals with it. They'll say, 'You didn't put in the brief that she had to say and do X, and if you want her to redo it we'll need another fee.' They put contracts in place and they sort everything out for me—it's made my life so much easier.



Promoting Tasti wholefood bars in a Facebook post.



I'm taking the mickey in this picture, but doing the washing is genuinely one of my favourite chores. Partnering with Persil for a promo in February 2018 was the perfect job for me.

**The majority of my work still comes to me organically:
people and companies approaching me directly because of
my social-media presence.**

While I'm working closely with Outspoken, and they're looking for new opportunities for me, the majority of my work still comes to me organically: people and companies approaching me directly because of my social-media presence. But the great part is, my management takes all the pressure of communication away from me. I typically have an initial face-to-face meeting with a company to see if I want to engage with them, and if the vibe is right and I like their product, concept or brand, the deal gets sent straight through to Outspoken to handle all the detail. They'll look after the next 30 or so emails—that's how much work it takes away from me!

Before I agree to work with a company, my rule is that their product or service has to be either something I've used in the past or something I really want to try. Then I'll test it out over weeks or months or whatever's appropriate. If I find that I do like it, I'll get back to the company and talk about the sort of campaign they're after—do they want videos or photos or blogs—and I'll try to create content that's going to be helpful for my followers. My work with Fonterra on their Anchor range of high-protein yoghurts is a good example. Rather than just posting a photo of the yoghurt, I've been turning it into a recipe that people can use to boost their protein intake. It's a win-win: the brand gets the exposure they want, and my followers get content that is relevant and useful.

Sometimes the job is just a one-off, or a seasonal campaign for fashion brands such as Farmers or Glassons. But my focus is definitely on longer-term relationships with companies that I'm proud to align with and that suit my audience and my style. My goal is to work with those companies to create lasting, fun, awesome content. I really want my channels to be interesting and engaging, not just a series of ads that my followers will scroll right past.

CHAPTER 35

THE FINAL CUT

ON MY 27TH BIRTHDAY—20 December 2017—I made a pretty emotional video for my YouTube channel. I don't know why it is, but I always feel a bit sensitive and moodswingy around my birthday, especially as I get older. I guess it's because I tend to start thinking about everything I've done in the year since my last one, and wondering if I have achieved everything I meant to. *Am I doing as much as I should? Am I doing what I really want to do with my life?* The good news is that the answer this time was yes; I was where I wanted to be and everything was going well. But even so, with every birthday I still get that mild sense of dread and the fear that life is passing me by!

The other reason I was a bit teary in the video was that I was announcing to the world that I had booked in for my second major surgery with Dr Repta, to remove the excess skin on the lower part of my body. When I had my first skin-removal surgery, he made it clear that there was no way he could work on my tummy, back and breasts *and* my bottom and thighs all in one go—it would have been too much of a shock to my system, and would have made the operation too long. It was always in the back of my mind that one day I would be able to 'finish' the job, removing the rest of the excess skin. In the meantime I had other goals: saving to buy a house, having a family one day, hopefully . . . while the surgery was a dream, it wasn't a priority.

But when Dr Repta's team reached out again and offered to perform the

second part of the surgery, what else could I say but yes? The thought was overwhelming at first, especially as it was going to happen reasonably quickly, but I knew I had to jump at this chance.

Although you'd think I'd be used to disrobing on camera by now, I still found it quite hard baring my bum and the saggy loose skin on my thighs for the video.

So, by the time you are reading these words, I will have had a Brazilian butt lift (where they remove fat from other parts of your body using liposuction and inject it into your buttocks to give them a fuller, rounder shape), an excisional butt lift to remove the excess skin in that area, and an excisional thigh lift, which will do the same for my thighs.

Although you'd think I'd be used to disrobing on camera by now, I still found it quite hard baring my bum and the saggy loose skin on my thighs in that birthday video. It wasn't so much the thought of the cruel comments that I knew would appear—I've sort of made my peace with those posts, and I know they say more about the person behind them than they say about me. When I get negative responses I just have to remind myself who I am as a person, and that a little bit of loose skin on my thighs (okay, a *lot* of loose skin!) doesn't define me.

What really made me tear up was thinking about finally saying goodbye to that loose skin. I didn't love it when I first saw it appearing—I had to remind myself every single day that if loose skin was the price I had to pay for becoming healthy, then I was prepared to pay it. I repeated affirmations to myself on a daily basis, until I learned to love and accept that skin as part of my journey. By now I could truly say I loved it as part of my body—and it was going to go.

It might not make sense to everyone, but for me this is the last stage in a long, long process, the finishing touch to the major 'renovation' my body has undergone. My journey to health will never be over and I will always be a work in progress—I will always want to do more and give more—but this will be the last major surgery I will have to undergo as part of my transformation. And this skin is the last physical piece of the old, overweight me.

So it's a bittersweet feeling. But at the same time, I can't wait to be able to

see the muscle definition in my legs that I know is under there, and to have the firm, fit-looking bum I have worked so hard for at the gym!

WHEN I FIRST STARTED PREPARING to return to Arizona to complete the surgery, I was planning to go over with a friend who wanted to have a tummy tuck. We thought we could be one another's emotional support, and hire a nurse to help us both out.

I really wanted Trent to be there as well, but we had just booked a holiday in Rarotonga for the start of 2018, and we didn't think it would be possible for him to take any more time off work. I was a bit bummed about this, but I tried to be practical—I had survived the aftermath of my first skin-removal surgery entirely on my own, so I knew I could do it. This way we could have our lovely Raro holiday together before I went off to be cut up, and I knew Trent would be there to look after me when I got home.

Well . . . it sounded okay, but in the end we changed our minds. We talked about it a lot, and decided that it was more important for Trent to be there in the States with me for the surgery. We cancelled Raro and started planning a wee road trip on the way to Arizona. Trent will stay with me during the operation and the first three or four days afterwards, and then he'll head back home to work. My friend who was contemplating the tummy tuck is undecided at this stage, so I'm glad I'll have Trent with me.

Obviously the ideal would have been for him to remain in the States throughout my recovery, but that just isn't going to be practical. And instead of him using up his leave to be with me while I'm grumpy, sore and on pain meds, we figure it is a much better idea to have a fabulous holiday together first, so I have some great memories to get me through the recovery period!

I am also keen to have a better look around the States this time. My first visit wasn't exactly a holiday, and the only things I saw in Los Angeles were the inside of a studio and a bit of Culver City.

While we were planning our trip, the Coachella music festival line-up came out—and what do you know, it is going to fit right into our itinerary! We couldn't pass that up. We both love music festivals and this has to be one of the world's greatest. So the plan now is to fly to LA, go to Coachella, then drive the rest of the way overland. We'll have a couple of days in Las Vegas and a night in the Grand Canyon, arriving in Phoenix in time for my pre-surgery appointments.

Trent will be my nurse for the first few days post-surgery. Having my best friend right there supporting me is the big win, but it's also going to save me a lot of money on nursing costs!

Trent will be my nurse for the first few days post-surgery. Having my best friend right there supporting me is the big win, but it's also going to save me a lot of money on nursing costs! After he leaves, I'll spend another couple of weeks recovering before braving the flight home.

Another way I plan to save money this time is to ask Dr Repta to send my pain medication prescriptions to my GP in New Zealand before I leave, so I can get them filled here rather than paying hundreds of dollars for them in the States. I learned a lot from my first trip—especially not to go alone!—and while this is bound to be a different experience (new parts of my body are being operated on), it feels good to be going into it familiar with the people and the place. I have been through major surgery before and fought my way back to 100 per cent health, and that gives me the confidence to go ahead and just get this done!

CHAPTER 36

LOOKING BACK ON THE JOURNEY

4.1.18

You can't go back and change the beginning, but you can start where you are and change the ending. Every new day is another chance to change your life. Start small. Start by eating a good breakfast or going for a 20-minute walk. When you have that as part of your normal routine, tackle something else like lunch or dinner. Slowly and surely, over time, your life and routine will begin to transform. By starting with small changes you won't feel overwhelmed, or get discouraged and decide to give up completely when you can't get one aspect under control. The new thing will become your normal and you will start to need less and less motivation to live your life in a healthy way. 2018 is your year!

AS A NEW YEAR ROLLS around, it's always time to think about where I've been and where I'm going. I know 2018 is going to be a big year for me

personally, with my second skin-removal surgery and the recovery from that. My goal is to be in the best possible shape physically and mentally before heading off to have it done, then to give myself plenty of time for recovery before getting back into my fitness hard-out and regaining what I will inevitably lose over those few months. As I've said before, every one of us is a work in progress and there is no 'done' when it comes to fitness. I know my journey to health is a lifelong one and there will always be new challenges and opportunities.

I'm super-happy with my life now, even though it's pretty busy. My average day sees me get up at about 7 a.m., and after breakfast I spend the first two hours of my work day replying to emails and messages on my social channels—just talking to my followers, trying to answer their questions and generally engaging with my online community.

I normally follow that with a gym class. I look at my schedule at the start of each week and pick which classes I'm going to take and when, and I put them in my diary so I know I have made the commitment to go. After lunch, the afternoons tend to fill up with events, especially over summer. I'll usually have some content to create—maybe a recipe post I want to do or a video I need to film for a client. A single video can take me five hours to make and edit, believe it or not! And now that we have our gorgeous French bulldog puppy Maddox, he needs to be exercised, which has added another factor to my day.

While things are going really well, I've still got lots of goals and ambitions. I want to get out from behind the screen more often and really connect with people.

Evenings are for dinner with Trent, and spending time with him. Some nights we have a netball game, and after that a few chores, then we might have 20 minutes or so to relax before it's bedtime! We both like *Shortland Street*, and we know that if we've had a really stressful day, we can watch an episode of that (often it's recorded) and just check out for a wee while. We don't get too hooked in, so if we miss one, that's fine. Without ads it's about 20 minutes long, so it's the perfect amount of time for a wind-down. Then it's off to sleep, before getting up and doing it all over again!

While things are going really well, I've still got lots of goals and

ambitions. I want to get out from behind the screen more often and really connect with people. I would love to do more public speaking, which is a bit of a surprise coming from someone who used to find it terrifying! I still get nervous before speaking at events, but I think that's a good thing; if I don't get nervous, it's because I don't care enough. I'm a perfectionist and I always want to do the best job possible, so when I'm nervous about something, it means I have a passion for it and I want to give it 110 per cent.



Welcoming our puppy Maddox to the family in November 2017.



Out and about with Trent and Maddox.

Emceeing events gives me a real buzz, and more and more opportunities are coming up for that sort of work. I loved working with The Edge radio team at KFC Edgefest in November 2017, travelling around the country and hosting the competition winners who got to hang out in the VIP area. Having a public presence and interacting directly with people is something I really enjoy. And now I have written this book, of course, which is another way of reaching out to people and hopefully meeting more of them at promotional events. Watch this space, world—you haven't seen it all yet!

SPEAKING OF WRITING, THE PROCESS of putting this book together has given me the opportunity to look back on the last three and a half years—as well as the whole of the last 27—and to really appreciate the journey I have been on. I know that the 23-year-old Simone, 169 kg and struggling just to get out of bed in the morning, would hardly recognise the me I am now. I have lost nearly 90 kg of body weight, and a large amount of excess skin. I have done things my younger self could only dream of: skydiving, appearing on a US chat show, swimming across the harbour and, recently, waterskiing. Every day I feel thankful that I made that decision to lose the weight, to get healthy and appreciate all the wonderful things my body does for me. (I even appreciate getting my period—I know that sounds weird, but after years of being so overweight that I'd stopped menstruating, I am grateful every month when it arrives. I have worked so hard to get my body to a place where it's

healthy, and my period is my body showing me, every month, that it's functioning like a normal body should.)

There were friendships that went by the wayside when the changes that were happening in my life were just too huge for some people to handle.

I have lost other things along the way: there were friendships that went by the wayside when the changes that were happening in my life were just too huge for some people to handle. My mum told me right at the start that my relationships would change if I overhauled my life so dramatically, and I didn't believe her, but once again she was right.

When you become successful in meeting your personal goals, you will find that not everyone wants to come along on the journey. But the good news is that some of my friendships haven't changed, and some have become even stronger. My true friends have been there for me right through, and I can rely on them for everything. As much as a massive change can expose the cracks in a relationship, it can enhance one as well, and make it 10 times better. With my real friends, I know that no matter what any one of us is dealing with, we'll be able to get through it together.

It's nice to connect on a deeper level with people who are living what I'm living, dealing with the same issues I'm dealing with . . . and who understand what it's like to live in this weird partial spotlight.

I've made some wonderful new friends along the way, too, and I've become close to other bloggers, social influencers and personalities, including the gorgeous Matilda Rice and the amazing Makaia Carr. It's bizarre in a way, but it's easy to form strong connections with people like that because they understand what I'm doing and the world I'm living in. None of my other friends can fathom what I do; as much as I try to explain it to them, it doesn't seem like a real job. They all work nine-to-fives, so they don't see what I do as working—writing messages on Facebook and going off to an

event at midday! They just don't understand it.

So it's nice to connect on a deeper level with people who are living what I'm living, dealing with the same issues I'm dealing with, interacting with companies and brands, and who understand what it's like to live in this weird partial spotlight. They're also really fun people to hang out with—if you're working in a social space and you're doing well at it, then you've obviously got the kind of personality that draws people in. And we can help each other out, too. Everyone's got their own things going on, so we have weekly lunches where we discuss what we've got coming up and how we can give each other a hand. I have met a few people in this space who want to do it all on their own, but the majority have been very inclusive, which surprised me because I didn't think that would be the case. Most people want to build up the others in the industry around them, and I've found it to be an incredibly supportive environment.

THERE IS ABSOLUTELY NO DOUBT that having gastric-sleeve surgery changed my life. Not only did it enable me to lose the weight I needed to, but it helped me to completely alter my relationship with food. I was able to reduce what I ate without feeling like I was never full enough. Through physically not being able to eat so much food, I learned how to make the right food choices to give my body the fuel it needs, rather than just filling it up with junk.

My stomach is at a size now where I can genuinely eat a standard meal. We use the WOOP food-box service a few nights a week, and I can eat the adult-sized portion. If I go out to a restaurant, I can get through a standard portion of food. Not much more, mind you—I still can't eat anywhere near what I could in the bad old days, but I can eat enough to properly sustain myself and to get all the nutrients and energy I need.

I eat three standard meals and two or three snacks a day, and I exercise for between two and two and a half hours. I have regular blood tests to check my iron levels and other vital signs, so that I know I'm eating all the right things to make my body function.

I never used to be the kind of person to enjoy a night in on a Friday or Saturday but now I truly relish it.

When I first had the gastric surgery, I honestly thought I would never be able to eat or drink ‘normally’ again. I thought that a drink of champagne or even soda water was a thing of the past. These days, I can drink whatever I want. I can scull a glass of water, which still feels weird to me after only being able to sip for so long. If I go for a wild night out with friends I can have eight drinks, easy—although I have to say that is happening less and less! Maybe once a month I might have a drink, but I never do alcohol during the week. That’s not purely for health reasons—it’s more because I’ve grown up a bit, I reckon. My desire to socialise all the time seems to have receded a bit. I never used to be the kind of person to enjoy a night in on a Friday or Saturday but now I truly relish it (it helps having a handsome boyfriend to stay in with!). When I get invited to something now, instead of being super-excited, I have to weigh up whether I’d rather be in bed watching a movie. I also value my weekend time: I can’t afford to be hungover and not at my best. Waking up in the morning feeling good is worth too much to me now!

The only lasting side effect of the surgery is the fact that I need to take an acid-reflux tablet every single day. If don’t take it, I’ll be feeling very uncomfortable by the end of the day, especially if I’ve been drinking alcohol or carbonated drinks. Other than that, the only pills I take are multi-vitamins, and sometimes evening primrose oil and magnesium.

THE SKIN-REMOVAL SURGERY WAS ALSO a total game-changer. I cannot emphasise enough how amazing it was to be given back my breasts and my figure, after I had worked so hard to lose weight and tone up. I absolutely love having boobs again, and I’m so thankful to Dr Repta for doing such a brilliant job. I can’t wait to have the lower-body surgery and finally have a bottom and toned thighs to show for all the hours I have put in at the gym!

The recovery from the surgery was the worst pain I have ever been in—I can’t imagine anything else hurting that much. (I haven’t had kids yet, though, so don’t hold me to that one!) That said, when I look back, the extreme pain only lasted for a couple of days, and then I started managing it and working with it. I don’t want to put off anyone who might be considering the surgery, so I would just encourage you to prepare yourself and surround yourself with supportive people who will look after you while you recover. I thought I was such a tough cookie and I could deal with it on my own, but

boy, was I wrong! At least I learn from my mistakes though, eh?

In terms of getting my fitness back, I am still re-building more than two years on. My tummy muscles have nowhere near the strength they had beforehand, and it could take years to build that back up. I still feel a stretching sensation when I do certain things, but it doesn't affect my day-to-day life. I know I am going to lose some fitness again after the lower-body surgery, but it's not as major as having your core muscles cut and re-stitched, and I don't expect the recovery to take quite so long. My legs are going to be out of gym action for some time, though, that's for sure.

My surgery scars are barely visible now. The most obvious one is the line across my back, and even that has faded almost completely. When I wear dresses that reveal it, occasionally someone will point it out and say, 'Woah, that's a big scar.' I just say, 'Yeah, I've lost a lot of weight and that scar is from my skin-removal surgery.' I don't even think about it anymore, or try to hide it—those scars are an important part of my story. And the reaction tends to be, 'Oh, wow, good on you.'

My body isn't—and never will be—perfect, but it's mine. I've still got some loose skin on my arms and stomach, and I've got plenty of stretch marks. But I'm not ashamed of any of it. In fact, I love it all.

My body isn't—and never will be—perfect, but it's mine.

The path has been far from easy but damn, it's been worth it. Every lump, every bump, every inch of cellulite and loose skin on my body, I can now say I love from the bottom of my heart. I can run up and down the beach and know that, despite what anyone else thinks of my loose skin jiggling everywhere, I love myself and I accept my 'flaws'. One thing I like to remember when I'm in a bikini on the beach is that every other person there—no matter their size, colour or age—is dealing with their own insecurities, and is far more focused on their own body than on mine. To be beautiful means to be yourself.



My body will always be a work in progress, but I'm proud of every bit of it. And I'll never be afraid to strut my stuff on the beach!

I don't need to be accepted by others. I just need to accept myself.

IN THE LAST THREE AND a half years, I have undergone the most epic transformation you could imagine. When I stood on those scales at the jewellery factory, I could never have dreamed that I would be where I am today. I didn't know how I was going to lose the weight, but I knew I had the drive to do it—and I *have* done it. I've got my dream body, and it feels incredible to be so healthy and in control.

I know what it's like to start out on this journey. You put so much pressure on yourself, and you take everyone else's opinions on board. But at the end of the day you've got to do it for you. Unless *you* truly want it, you're never going to get there.

It's not going to work if you're doing it to please your husband or your

best friend or your parents or whoever. Their love, amazing as it may be, is not going to get you through it. It's *your* love and *your* sense of self-worth that's going to push you to do it. You've got to love every inch of yourself, and that love will help you reach your goal.

I hope that sharing my journey—the good, the bad and the ugly—has been helpful to you. The most important thing to me in all of this is making a difference to other people, and my greatest satisfaction comes from playing a part in other people's stories and sharing in their lives—their struggles, their successes. I've been there, I know what it's like, and I know it can be done. I've loved having you along, and I hope you continue to take me with you.



At the pool with my bestie Laura (left), who grew up just down the road from me. We are still good friends today.



Skiing is in my blood, and as a kid I was a bit of a daredevil on the slopes.



Working out at Les Mills in early 2015. In this pic I weighed around 120 kg.



I love the endorphin hit that I get from smashing out a workout. These photos were taken roughly two

years apart.



My reward for passing the 100 kg mark: skydiving!



I couldn't believe all the interest from the media in my story.

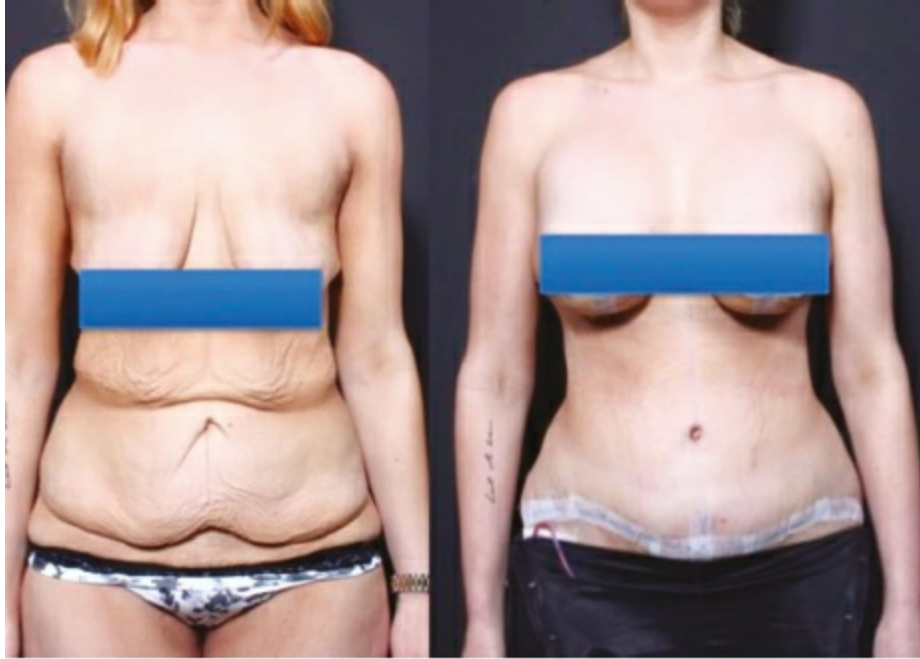


Standing around naked while the pre-op markings are drawn onto my body—and a camera crew looks

on!



Before surgery on the left, and 24 hours later on the right. I was too drugged up to even brush my hair, but it was so exciting to see the changes in my body already.



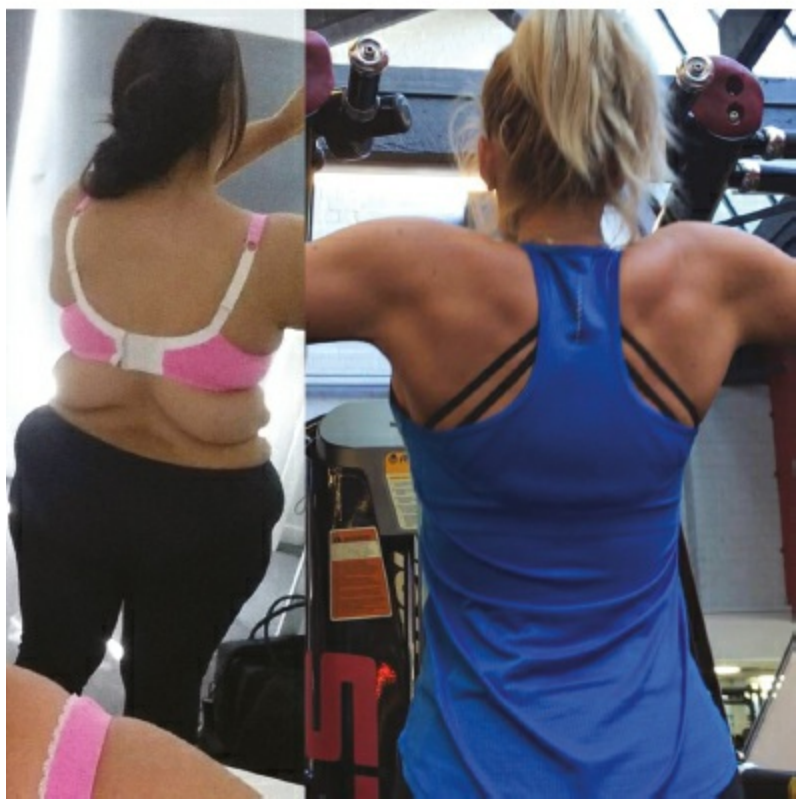
Photos from before and after surgery. The 'after' photos were taken at my first follow-up appointment with Dr Repta. Please forgive the builder's crack!



Another surreal day: appearing on *FABLife* with Tyra Banks (left), Lauren Makk and Joe Zee.



Becoming a cover star for *Good Health Choices* magazine. Who would have thought?



Before-and-after photos always get a huge response from my followers on social media. For me, it's a

way of reminding myself how far I've come.



Meeting Trent was another significant turning point in my life. We love getting outdoors and staying active, as well as sharing quiet times together. The kayaking photo was taken in Omaha.



A photo series showing the changes in my body and the fading of the surgery scars over time. From left to right: pre-surgery, six months on, and one year on.

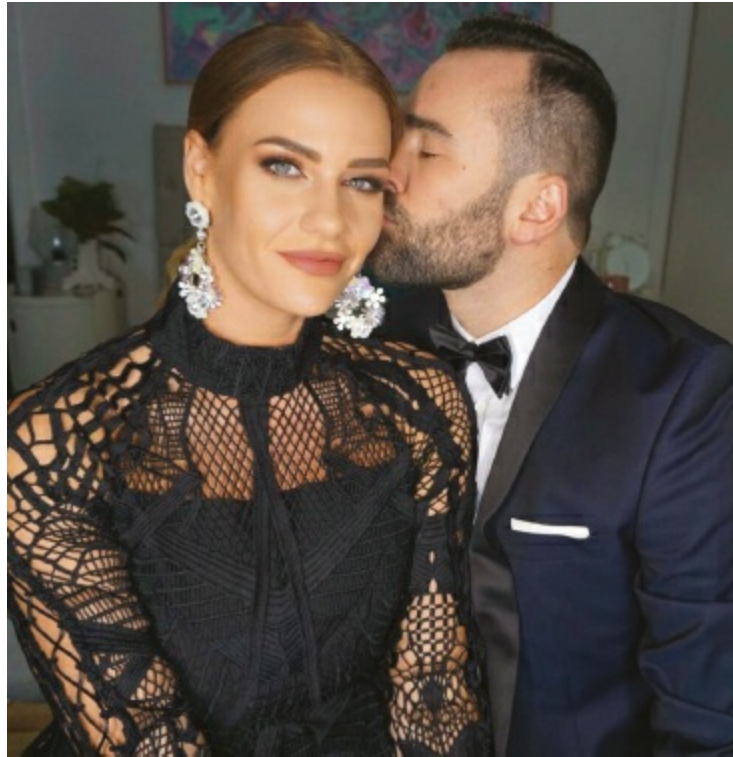


One of my favourite before-and-afters. It's important to note that I still felt beautiful in the picture on the left.



This is another photo series that my followers loved. From left to right: getting my pre-op markings,

having a post-op consultation, and taking my new bod to the beach. A little spray tan never hurts!



All dressed up for *Remix* magazine's 20th anniversary ball in May 2017.



A couple of photo pairings I posted online, showing how camera angles, lighting and clothing can hide 'flaws'. I like to look good, but it's important to me that I'm not always promoting an unrealistic image.



Celebration time: the 'Simone's Journey to Health' Facebook page hit 300,000 followers in July 2017.



Life isn't all glam: straight after a glitzy event you will often find me switching into my gym gear for a

game of netball. I still have to work hard to stay healthy and keep in shape.



Modelling our cute matching PJs, which are printed all over with pics of Maddox! Meanwhile he takes it all in his stride.



I posted this pic on social media in 2017, to show that I can still feel sexy with a little loose skin here and there. Your skin does settle again after surgery and won't ever be perfectly smooth.



Embracing a beautiful day in Germany in October 2017. I was chosen as the New Zealand winner of the Weleda Global Garden competition and got to travel to Europe along with 15 other contestants from around the world. At the end of the week Weleda selected a global brand ambassador.



Taking our Halloween look to the next level in 2017.



Posing for a photo on my 27th birthday in December 2017. I made a YouTube video that day, announcing that I had booked my second surgery with Dr Repta.



Sharing the loose skin on the bottom half of my body with the world. I'm wearing my birthday dress from the photo above.



Trent is such a good sport when it comes to dress-up! Even Maddox got in on the act for Christmas 2017.



Getting glam for a friend's hen's weekend on Waiheke in January 2018. This look was a personal favourite—I love, love, LOVE the jumpsuit.



FOLLOW SIMONE'S ONGOING JOURNEY

f [@simonesjourneytohealth](#)

 [simone_anderson](#)

 [Simone Anderson](#)

 [journeytohealth.co.nz](#)