

[Transcript] Conversations / Shanelle Dawson: the daughter's story

ABC LISTEN, podcasts, radio, news, music and more.
There's an awful statistic that most of us have heard.
In Australia, one woman a week is killed by her current or former partner.
These women are loved by their families and friends,
and, of course, if they have children, then the greatest loss is theirs.
The children who have lost a mother
and many times to their own father's violence.
Chanel Dawson is one of those children.
But unlike most other victims,
what happened in the Dawson family was played out in the public eye.
It was a podcast, The Teacher's Pet,
that helped refocus the criminal case against Chanel's father, Chris Dawson.
And just last year, 40 years after Chanel's beloved mom, Lynn,
disappeared from the family's northern beach's home,
Chris Dawson was found guilty of her murder.
For so long, what happened in Chanel's family has been told by other people.
But now Chanel is telling her own story in the book, My Mother's Eyes.
Hi, Chanel. Hi, Sarah.
I want to start with your mom, with Lynn.
Where did she grow up?
She grew up in Clovelli.
So, Clovelli by the beach in Sydney,
does that mean she spent a lot of time in the water as a kid?
Yes, very much, her and her siblings.
There's an ocean pool just at the bottom of the hill where they live.
And I know that they did, I guess, Saturday surf club or what it was.
But Uncle Greg told me that they did laps in that pool.
And I've got a photo of my mom at a swimming competition
when she's probably a young teenager.
I know that they were in the water a lot.
And what kind of student was she at school, do you know?
Well, I believe she was a prefect.
So, I guess she must have been a pretty good one.
How did she first meet Chris Dawson?
I think they met at a dance when they were about 16
and was sort of high school sweethearts, I guess.
So, at Sydney Boys and Sydney Girls High School.
So, they weren't at the same school.
You've seen footage of your mom when she was a young woman.
She appeared on an ABC TV show together with your father back in 1975.
Why were they on TV?
It was called Checkerboard.
I think it was a documentary on twins.
And I remember seeing that growing up, you know, on the old Beta VHS video that we had.

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And there was a few other things my dad had on that.
But I haven't seen it since I was a little kid.
So, Headly Thomas, who did the podcast,
found that in the archives and brought that treasure to our family.
How did your mom come across as a young woman?
Well, I'm biased, so.
Of course, I just think she's beautiful and warm and graceful and humble.
And obviously adored my father.
So, they were married young.
Where did they set up home together?
I think I had just been born, maybe, before they then moved to Bayview.
So, yeah, so they set up in Bayview.
So it's on the northern beaches and it's sort of bank seatries.
Well, it was back then a lot bushier than it is now.
Was your mom working outside the home before you and your sister came along?
Before my sister and I came along, she...
I'm not sure at what point she transitioned from nursing to working in childcare,
but she was a registered nurse working in the childcare nearby.
And I believe she took some time off when she had me.
And then when my sister was still quite young, she returned back to the childcare centre.
And so, working closely with kids like that, she must have enjoyed children.
Did she always want kids of her own?
Yes, very much so.
What sort of things did colleagues of hers and friends say about the sort of mother
that she was with you and your sister when you were both little?
The unanimous consent is that she was warm and loving and adored us and we were her world.
And I know her type of the nurturer, you know, being a nurse and in childcare.
Obviously, she had that quality.
What about you, Chanel?
Do you have any memories yourself at all of your mother?
Unfortunately, no, just flashes of more traumatic ones,
which have arisen in more recent years.
So, the time that your mother and father were living at home together
and you were a little girl, you don't have any clear memories of what that was like?
No, I don't.
I believe perhaps the trauma has caused me to cut them out
because I have strange little snapshots of sort of seemingly irrelevant things.
The bathtub that was in their bathroom or a toy that I was given,
you know, sort of random things that don't really hold much significance.
But when I look back at photos, I realise,
oh, that was around the time my mum would have still been alive.
So, I have faith and hope that I will be able to access memories of her
once I've moved more through the trauma.
Your nana, your mum's mum, was worried about your mother

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and what was going on between her and her husband.

And I think she wrote about that in a letter to her other daughter, Pat, to your aunt, Pat.

Do you remember the kind of thing that was worrying her about the relationship between your mother and father?

Well, I was oblivious to it at the time, but in more recent years with my nana's journals or diaries being used as evidence, that my mum, which I'm sure she probably disclosed only the tip of the iceberg, basically, but that they were having troubles and that my father was always angry at her.

And I guess she insisted that they went to counselling together.

And it was just a few days after your nana wrote this letter about her concerns about her daughter's marriage in January 1982 that your mum was gone.

And what did your father say had happened?

My father said that my mum had gone away for a while to get some time to herself.

And on that day that she was suddenly not there in the house,

he took you and your sister to a swimming pool

where your mother had planned to meet with your nana and other family.

What do you remember about that day at the pool?

So it was the 9th of January and we were meant to be going with our mum.

And I don't know if my dad was already there as a lifeguard that day or something like that.

We're meant to have a picnic with my mum's mum, her nana, and a friend of my dad's.

And my dad supposedly, his story is that he dropped her off at the bus stop in the morning to return something to the shops.

And that was the last he supposedly saw of her that morning.

I don't remember at what point this flash of memory came to me.

I record, I think it's turnstiles or an entry point anyway.

And my memory is that my father's version of events, whatever he was recalling, was different to what I remembered it.

And I tried to correct his version of events and I remember getting in trouble for it.

He took me by the arm and took me away from whoever would have been there, probably Phil and my nana.

And I don't know what he said.

I just remember the feeling of being scolded, but being angry about it and knowing that what I was saying was true.

And I guess probably feeling very confused.

Like why was I getting in trouble for telling the truth?

And I can feel the feeling in my body, but I don't recall what exactly was said.

How long did it take your father to report your mother as missing to the police?

It was quite a long time.

I guess he was keeping up the pretense that she had been calling in and telling him she was fine.

And she just needed a bit more time.

I think it was six weeks.

And then he posted sort of one line in the local newspaper or something like that.

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Asking her to come home.

Yeah.

So he had been telling you and your mother's family that they were in contact, that she was ringing and she was okay.

Absolutely.

So yeah.

And as time went on, Chanel, what story was he telling you and your sister about why your mother hadn't come back home?

He mostly said to me in more recent years,

I don't know what happened to your mum.

And he seemed very convincing when he would say that.

I think some of the stories that he may have posed them as possible theories, rather than that's what happened, that maybe she went off with a religious cult.

Maybe she went to New Zealand.

He told my nana that she went to the Central Coast to get away for a while.

So my nana would go there regularly on the train because she didn't drive and hand out flyers and ask people if they'd seen her.

And to you and your sister, it was clear that your mum had just chosen not to be with you, that it was a choice that she was making not to be present in your lives.

Yeah, I guess that we grew up believing that,

although I always believed because I never doubted that she loved us.

I believe she must have had a mental breakdown or amnesia of some kind

who have stayed away for so long.

You and your sister had a teenage babysitter who'd moved into the family home at the end of 1981.

And you didn't know this at the time, but she and your father were in a sexual relationship.

And looking at it in today's terms, you know, he'd been grooming her.

She was a PE student of his at high school and he wanted to be able to continue that.

Was there for you then a moment after your mum had disappeared that you realised this teenager and your father were in a relationship?

I don't have clear memories of that other than my dad saying they had to wait till she was 18 to get married and things like that.

But I think we were just told a version of events and we believed our dad

and we just sort of probably celebrated the fact because that's all we had to go on, I guess.

And if my mum was portrayed to be the bad person for leaving us,

then there's probably sort of shame or I guess we probably just felt glad because we liked the babysitter at the time.

Do you remember their wedding? Were you there for that?

I was there. I've got a couple of photos.

At one point I went through and culled a bunch of my photos,

never knowing I might actually want them one day, but you know, just too much heartache.

I kept one photo of us sitting on some steps in our ugly little cotton 80s looking dress, puffy sleeves and with our cousins.

So this new person is brought into your family home.

Your mum's not there. Were there photos of her?

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Was she talked about it all or was it just like she almost never existed in terms of the way that the family spoke about your life?
It was like she never existed. No photos, no mention of her.
I think that was one of the red flags for me once I got older too.
I guess I excused it in my mind thinking it caused my dad too much heartache, but when I looked back I thought, no, even if the mother had abandoned the children, you could still talk about her or share some memories and yeah, it was this taboo subject that we just didn't speak about and if somebody from outside of the inner family, you know, someone we didn't see as often maybe mentioned her, there was this uncomfortable silence and they didn't know they weren't meant to mention her.
Once Jay became pregnant, you all moved to Queensland and so this teenager had gone from being a babysitter to being a stepmother. What do you remember about her attitude towards you and your sister? What did it feel like to be a child in that home?
I recall liking her as a babysitter initially and I'm not sure at what point her attitude towards us changed, that there was no affection.
I think there was a courtiocis on the cheek for good night.
I think there was some affection with dad.
I don't recall it being very much.
It's not like we sat there and cuddled watching a movie together or anything like that, like I do with my daughter.
With the babysitter turned reluctant stepmother, none at all, did I recall. We would pose for photos, but we weren't allowed to touch her daughter or call her our sister or anything like that.
It must have been a really weird environment to grow up in.
It is now that I look back at it.
At the time, I guess it's all we knew, so you don't really realise.
I remember when I'd visit friends for sleepovers and things, which I don't think happen often, but I was like intrigued to see how this is how this family operates and they're having fun and laughing together and there's affection and care and yeah, it's really sad.
I know some of the freedom we were given was probably normal for kids back in the 80s, but it was also due to us not being wanted around, which is really sad.
Jay left the marriage after six years and what did your high school Home Economics teacher give you when your stepmother moved out?
My Homec teacher, bless her, told me that now that I was the woman of the house, I think I was 13, she gave me some cookbooks and told me it was my duty to cook for my father. Were things easier at home after she left?
Was it kind of things with your dad feel a bit more natural somehow?
Yeah, I think my dad was quite heartbroken at Jay leaving, so there was that

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and it was a feeling a little bit of my sister and I kind of looking after him a little bit and telling him it was okay, but it was definitely so much freer once she left.

It was yeah, it was a good time for my sister and I.

Your father wasn't single for long, he had a number of girlfriends and then married again in 1993

and in those years as a teenager, Chanel,

like so much of what goes on for us as teenagers is trying to work out

who we are in the world and who's our example

and what kind of adult are we going to be and

you know, was your mum in your thinking, do you remember,

was the question about her something that was present in your mind as a teenager?

I don't think so.

I think my defence mechanisms just had me kind of push her out to the peripherals.

I do recall when we did have time with Nana Sims and we did get to talk about her

and look at her photo albums, you know, we're actually allowed to feel,

every time we went it's probably the first thing I would do,

walk straight to the photo albums and open them and look at all the photos of my mum

but I also was aware it would make my Nana feel sad, she would get sad,

so I didn't want, you know, there was I guess in my young teenage mind confusion around that

because I always believed she would come back eventually and now I can empathise

what a mother must feel, the sorrow she must have felt.

Were you a pretty independent kind of teenager?

I was, yeah, and I rebelled a little bit against some of the tight reigns that were,

maybe because I was the oldest, I'm not sure because I know my siblings certainly didn't have

as much restrictions around their freedom but maybe it was also because they didn't trust me

as much, I don't know.

What did you imagine your future might look like back then?

Well, I did work experience in grade 11 at the police station which is pretty funny for those

who know me now, nothing against police but it's just I'm not a very well structured disciplined person.

And I did train to be a teacher and I thought that was the career I would end up falling into but you know life took a very different turn.

And were you living away from home from a young age while you were studying?

Yeah, I left home at 17, my stepmother and I didn't get along at all and my father said

that I would be the cause of his third marriage breaking down so something needed to change and

although it was young it was also this sense of freedom beyond what I'd experienced so

it was a good adventure in lots of ways.

You headed off to the US by yourself as still a young woman, what did you do there?

I was a nanny so I answered an ad in a local paper so I didn't just go off with the backpack like I did in future travels.

Still a big thing to do to just head over to America by yourself.

Whereabouts?

I was 21, legal age in America.

I flew into LA and then into Denver and then was picked up by my nanny family

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and taken to this sort of in the foothills of the Rocky Mountains.

It's a very different landscape than the one you would have been familiar with in the east coast of Australia.

Yes, very different a long way from the ocean which only I'd struggle with but it was beautiful. How did you handle the cold?

With a lot of layers of clothing I think.

I arrived in the springtime so I naively with an Australian naive point of view went with my cotton clothing and it snowed on the day I arrived in the middle of May so I had to go shopping pretty quickly but you do a climatize and so you were doing nannying over there in the States and how are you spending your time when you weren't working with families helping them care for their kids?

The first family it didn't work out with but then I found another family.

There was some transition time in between where I was doing other things and house sitting and working in a little new age shop and then found this other family and I did a lot of hiking.

I did a lot of live music.

There was a lot of it was near Boulder, Colorado.

There's a lot of really amazing music that comes through and shows are a lot cheaper there and just had some good friends.

You had a combi van.

At one point you had many vehicles.

And so where would you take off to?

Where would you travel?

Would you go with a set goal in mind or what?

Usually when I naanied this particular mum was a lobbyist and only needed me for six months out of the year so I would work pretty solidly for those six months and I waited tables as well and then save up money and then I would hit the road when she didn't need me anymore.

So where I went sometimes I would just hit the road and not know where I was going and just sort of choose a fork in the road and I loved that kind of adventure and freedom.

You know it didn't always work out but I've lived to tell the tale.

And what animals were your traveling companions on that on those journeys?

Well I had a dog.

He was my solid companion and protector and he was amazing.

At one point a cat joined us.

She wasn't playing.

My friend had rescued a cat that was pregnant and when I met her she's this teeny tiny little kitten who only heard from me and I just felt it sounds insane but she was the best traveling companion.

We opened the butterfly window on the camper and she would come in and out of that wherever we were parked because I always parked somewhere natural.

I wasn't in cities or anything like that and she would come hiking with me my dog and you know if we encountered another dog she'd go and hide in the bushes for a minute and then come back out 100 meters down the road and she was amazing.

It sounds like this was a happy time for you these years in the States.

In lots of ways yeah I always had cycles of depression.

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But I you know I still managed to function enough to be a nanny and look after kids and on my weekends I think I sometimes would shut out the world and I wasn't as crushing as some of my more recent.

Were you in much contact with family back in Australia during that time?

So when I first went over in 2000 I think I had an email address.

I wasn't very good at calling very often because it was quite expensive but when I was with the nanny family I think I was allowed to call from their phone.

So semi-regular I think I probably wasn't very good at communicating because I would just sort of get absorbed in my adventures.

My family were possibly hurt by that and I may have even been called self-absorbed or something like that but you know it was a loving rapport between us.

But you also I guess had the chance to have some distance and find out who you were outside of that family unit.

Yeah which I think was crucial.

While you were living away were you aware of the police investigations that were very slowly continuing into your mother's disappearance?

Not so much I would my mum's family would usually mention it in their emails to me.

I don't think I knew the scope of it and I certainly didn't suspect my father.

I think my auntie Pat probably told me one of the findings you know was murdered by a known person.

I think it was my defence mechanisms that were really good at denial in those days and just wouldn't actually have considered that as a possibility.

Because there had been I think two coronial inquests.

There'd been excavations at your family home and there had been these different findings that she had been murdered a person of a known person.

You were doing investigations in your own way to how were you trying to find out what had happened to your mum? What pathways were you using?

I was going to psychics quite a lot which I noticed some people that's a bit unconventional to me that's perfectly normal but it was also the only avenue that I could see that might bring me some answers and I got lots of different answers. It was just before I left Hawaii that one psychic was the first to ever say I believe your mum was murdered. I can see him.

If you show me a picture of your dad I'll tell you if that's who I can see.

And then I left Hawaii and I didn't sort of follow up on that. It was a friend of a friend and I also consequently just shut that reading out of my mind. I completely forgot about it.

Must have just again been in denial and not ready to face that possibility.

You know as you say unconventional but I think also completely understandable because you've got this huge hole in the centre of your heart and you're not getting answers from anywhere else.

Was it a comfort to go to someone with that question and think you might get an answer or would you leave those experiences with psychic feeling I don't know even more confused?

I would definitely go with a lot of hope that I would get answers and of course

I was always seeking where was she. It was never a thought that she'd actually wasn't still alive anymore so no one ever came back in the earlier years and said oh she's here and there and there was one psychic who said um this was in Colorado who said I see someone in your family going to jail for a very long time do you know who that would be and I really didn't

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at that point and I said no and maybe when I said that she then said that my mum was living in New Zealand and had a new family and didn't want to be found and I didn't sit well with me it really stirred up a lot of angst inside of me which I feel now is because it wasn't the truth but I believe that maybe she did see the truth and maybe didn't want to be the one to break it to me I certainly wouldn't want to be that person. So was there a moment when you accepted or realised to yourself she's gone mum's gone? It was when I was working on a boat and we were somewhere near Darwin I think and I was visiting with a friend and she doesn't consider herself psychic but had psychic ability from my perspective and believes that she could communicate with her mum who had passed over and I showed her a photo of my mum and she immediately felt like she was being strangled and then she felt that my mum was there and talking to her so she very gently broke the news to me that she didn't believe my mum was alive anymore and that she believed that my father had actually murdered her I was really resistant to hearing that and I thought no no she's got it wrong she's got it wrong but at the same time it was like that protective layer around me just cracked and couldn't hold me anymore in those lies and illusion and I could feel the truth of that in my being that it was true.

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Chanel when you began not so long ago to think that your father might be responsible for your mother's death in one sense it was shocking but did it also chime in some senses with the sort of man you'd seen your father to be once I came into the realisation it was a long process of and I'm still in some ways assimilating it but it was years and years of processing and trying to come to terms with it and still not wanting to believe it actually for a long time especially when it because I remained in my father's life for quite a few years afterwards and I couldn't make sense that this was the dad that I knew because I had I wasn't abused by him like I I recognise now there was emotional abuse but I wasn't aware of that at the time you know I'd never been hit by him I had never witnessed that I had memory of any other abuse by him to anyone else but there was other little red flag moments I guess it started to jump out and be remembered and go oh okay what kind of

thing there was one moment when I was 14 and we were driving home I don't know where from maybe

netball or something like that and I don't even remember what we were talking about so I was I guess the boat rocker of the family where I started at quite a young age going why don't we talk about my mum and started asked I would sometimes ask him questions about her and there was always this awkwardness and my sister would usually kind of get mad at me I think so I'm sure I probably must have asked him a question about my mum and he said it's a shame your mum let herself go she had such a pretty face and as a 14 year old I didn't realise just how messed up that was but as an adult I'm like oh that is misogynistic at its finest and that's a major red flag but I still remember the feeling of like sort of that grinding feeling in your solar plexus where something just didn't quite feel right so that was one of the first cracks that I recall as you say you're starting to to think can this be true can this be the explanation but you were still in your father's life I mean he hadn't been charged with anything he hadn't been arrested he's married he's working life is continuing for him what was it like to be around him with that thought that growing thought in your head am I allowed to swear it was a bit of a head fuck sorry um yeah it messed me up really badly I would hold it together and play the game

of pretense and happy families and then fall apart when I would leave and go back home and be dysfunctional for sometimes a couple of weeks afterwards it was one time I fell apart at my sister's house because I just couldn't hold it together anymore and she I think she just thought it was the pressure of being a single mum which is also another major stress but um it was seeing my father and I didn't feel like I could tell her that I didn't feel like I could share with her what I had come to believe and I do have some regrets that I didn't maybe tell her sooner because I she probably felt quite blindsided when I came out with the podcast in 60 minutes did you want to confront him at all was there a part of you that wanted to give voice to this yeah feeling yeah there's a part of me inside that was definitely screaming and I was constantly weighing up how I would do it and how it would be gentlist for everyone else as well as myself and whether or not I was ready to hold myself in that I knew I was probably going to lose my whole family um and then there's a part of me that thought well that's not fair why should I lose my family I didn't do it I wrote him lots of letters which I never sent it pretty much took over my life really what about your your mum's family her siblings and who'd wanted to know we kept searching for answers how did they respond when you confided in them that this is how you're thinking had changed yeah so I visited them just after I came into that realization and said to them I believe it was my father that murdered my mum and they were massively massively relieved that I had come to that conclusion and I think we probably all had a cry and a hug and I have so much respect for them in how they handled themselves and they never spoke badly about my father to me which I imagine

would have taken immense self-discipline and it was important to them that they didn't take him away as well they just let us have you know they knew it would be hard to lose a mum and a dad and was it also that they wanted you I guess to come to that realization yourself yeah because definitely as you were saying how do you tell someone that until they're ready to hear it or see it themselves yes definitely and I think they also didn't want to lose they ended up losing my sister anyway but I think they didn't want to lose their last connection to Lynn as well in 2012 detective Damien Loone who was working on the investigation into your mother's disappearance

he wanted to meet with you and what did he ask you to do Chanel so he was very sensitive and towards the end of the day he came forward with this idea he'd had and wondered how I felt about it about being hypnotized I was up for it you know I believe in that kind of thing it was a bit obscure for a policeman to be suggesting it we're surprised that this police officer was suggesting that what was his thinking I think I just deepened in respect for him that he was willing to think outside the boxes I think he just knew that they had tried everything else that they could within their power and wanted to try something else he made it clear that anything I saw couldn't be used as actual evidence and that they were hoping it would lead to further evidence and he never said you know my mum's body but I think that's what he was implying I struggled with feeling like I was betraying my father in doing so but I also justified it by saying to myself that if he wasn't involved then I wouldn't see anything that would convict him or tip the scales towards guilty for him or anything like that so at this point when the police asked you to consult with a hypnotist your father and your sister and the Dawson side of the family didn't know that you were harboring these questions about his guilt that you were doing this in secret from from them yeah what happened on the day what

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was it like to go and visit the hypnotist what happened it was really bizarre um so the first visit to Sydney was to test me to see if I was what do they use it susceptible to being hypnotized and apparently I am who I was so then they set a date for the actual appointment it was picked up by police people and driven to a psychiatrist was in a comfortable chair I think I was semi-reclined and I think it was something like I don't know if I went downstairs or if he just counted or something and regressed me I think the first time he did it he probably touched on an age or something that wasn't traumatic and then I could see images playing out before me and he would have me describe that and I could I could choose whether I spoke from my four-year-old self's perspective or from the adult who was witnessing this playing out and there was a few things that didn't make sense logically and he said just press on it's okay images would come quite clearly and then others were more hazy like when you're trying to tune a radio and it's a bit fuzzy and then you kind of get it good for a second and then it goes fuzzy again although probably no one tunes radios like that anymore I'm really old school um it was frustrating though because then it would go blank at points where I wanted to try to grasp it and maybe because I was putting pressure on myself to want so badly to have those answers that maybe it caused a bit of anxiety or whatever to not be able to see the whole thing and were you seeing things newly were you seeing things that you hadn't consciously remembered yet before yeah there was one point where he had me my sister in the car and my mum was slumped in the front and this is where one of the things that didn't really make sense so I was seeing her to that side of me whereas logically I knew that the passenger side would have been the other side but that's where one of the times he said don't worry just keep going and he said that's perfectly valid apparently he could tell by how my eyes were moving if I was seeing proper images or not um I saw my father digging at one point with headlights my memories of that was beside the pool but it's also possible that you know maybe he stopped there for a while and then went somewhere else and my brain has combined those memories there's lots of things that our brains can do I did see another person present afterwards I sort of maybe minding my sister and I and I don't know if again if that was the same day if it was a different day and there were these memories that used to always come to me as flashes of my teddy bear or something outside on the ground and the front door I don't know if it was my mum being driven off or if it was because I thought my mum was in that car or I just wish I had all the answers I wish I could ask my brain and it could just tell me what these things are and what they mean it's a bit frustrating I'm imagining that was an incredibly harrowing draining process to go through it was what you saw useful to the police do you know not so much because I um couldn't give a solid answer as to where her body may have been buried which I think is what they were needing did it solidify for you the the feeling that your father was responsible and that she was gone yeah I mean I I still wanted to doubt what I was seeing obviously and I questioned if you know but um it did solidify it in lots of ways made a lot of sense to me as to now I know the effects of trauma and things like that and I make more sense to myself now and I can be more compassionate with myself and not be as frustrated with myself

and the way I do things sometimes you became a mum yourself in in 2014 Chanel what sort of time was that in your life 2013 I conceived my daughter and birthed her in 2014 I I think I also had a lot of grief around the way I conceived her and not being in a loving partnership but I look back now and it was an opportunity to become a mum and I might not have had that opportunity otherwise

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so there's a blessing I of course missed my mum more than anything because I um I had been a doula and I knew the importance of having good support I knew how much new mums need support with a new baby especially without a partner so I um yeah I grieved all again I mean I never stopped grieving but it was new layers of grief and also the fact that my beautiful daughter wouldn't have a grandmother or a grandfather really what was your reaction when you heard that a podcast series was going to be made about your mother's disappearance what do you remember thinking about that I think I was a little naive I didn't know what a podcast was and I throughout my most of my life I don't watch mainstream TV so I I think I was still a little bit oblivious to the extent that the story had reached in media I was hopeful that it would bring answers and I felt compelled to be a part of it to honour my mum because I was still doing it somewhat covertly I guess in that you were still wanting to be able to maintain relationships with your dad and that side of the family yeah mostly my sister I was maintaining connection with that side of the family mostly for my sister did you listen to the episodes as they came out as they were released each week yes every week and sometimes I was at uni I was at uni those days so sometimes I could get out and listen to it as soon as it came out and what was that like Chanel it was again another surreal moment I've got to get a better word than surreal but going from listening to this and being in in the big feelings of it all and then having to put on a brave face go and pick up my daughter from kindly and act like everything was normal and try to be a happy mum it must have felt very weird to have this incredibly personal vulnerable story made public and people have opinions about it in theories and yeah were you aware of all of that conversation around the podcast sometimes I would read comments but it would usually trigger me too badly if people were respectful I don't care what opinion they have you know different theories is fine but when people you know obviously a lot of people feel very strongly about my father being a monster and things like that and that still hurts even though I understand where they're coming from there's still that part of me I guess it has care and maybe some loyalty though that's I think lessened but I think what triggered me the most is when things would get reported that weren't accurate I have a real thing about that what did it mean for your relationship with your sister so I did tell them I was participating I I guess I didn't know at that point in time obviously no one knew that it was going to become so huge I also didn't know that it was going to be fairly blatantly obvious that the people involved all believed it was my father so I'd say there was a lot more tension between me and my father's side of the family after that I don't think I saw them too many times from when the podcast aired yeah I mean there was always times when I'd meet up with the family where it felt there was all these unspoken the way my family communicators very indirectly which doesn't work for me or possibly behind my back and I can feel when there's something going on but I don't know I didn't understand what it was but yeah I think I only saw them a few more times and then I couldn't pretend anymore at the end of 2018 your father was arrested for the murder of your mother what was going through your head as you watched that arrest on tv I would have been given the heads up that it was happening but only briefly before it actually happened or maybe even just after some messages were starting to pour in I closed all the curtains and I just hunkered down in um deep processing mode and I couldn't respond to people's messages

and things like that I remember when it was shown later on in the news I was wanting to see the news about my daughter and she you know very innocently would say look it's papa and look it's your mum and I'd be like yeah okay time for a bath and be trying to get occupied so I could listen to what was happening or um yeah seeing my dad taken off taken off in handcuffs was really heartbreaking too did you go to the trial Chanel I did not know I didn't have child care for my daughter so it wasn't really an option had also just been in the major floods that were up in northern New South Wales and been hopping from short-term accommodation to short-term accommodation and I was trying to find us a long-term home so I guess I made that a priority

when you heard that he had been found guilty when you heard that verdict what was the reaction like for you um so I had been listening to the whole trial via video link and every second of it that I could although ironically the reception was really bad because of the flooding so there were times when I couldn't get to it which was really frustrating and still trying to be present to my daughter and meet her needs but in the moment that he announced the verdict I just picked up

my daughter from bush school at three o'clock and then a friend had walked across the bridge and taken her to the park and so I still had the trial playing out in my hand while she was there and I was just like yes thank you thank you thank you she took her and um it was only just shortly after that I heard the words Christos and I find you guilty yeah I mean it I don't have the words to explain the feeling really and it you know would have gone one way or the other but either way felt really massive so it wasn't anything as simple as a celebration it wasn't for me no or even when people would come up to me and say things like don't worry we'll get the bastard and stuff like that it wasn't where I was at it was just grief for me yes he's done a horrible thing and yes he deserves justice and yes I want very much for my family and myself to have closure there needs to be justice for my mum but the fact that he did it is still just so much grief and heartbreak for me personally that I wasn't in any way celebrating and I don't think my mum's family were either I think they were relieved I think they were grateful that it finally after so many years 40 years of waiting come to that conclusion

but I don't think any of them were rejoicing you tell a story in the book that on that day of the verdict when a friend took your daughter and you then went to pick her up in the park and what was she doing so a baby bird had fallen out of the nest and my daughter and the two other little kids that were there were kind of arguing about who would hold it and my friend ended up going and

my daughter and I were waiting for wires the volunteer wildlife services to arrive and there was a light misting of rain it was slowly getting a little bit darker right on dusk and my daughter was sitting on the ground and the little baby bird hopped over I hopped on her lap and then up to her shoulder or something and she she's a bit of an animal whisperer probably a little bit Steve when Star where she sometimes doesn't leave them alone when she should but um it was beautiful it was beautiful and it felt so sort of symbolic that there's this little baby bird fragile and needing nurturing and there was that part inside of myself that so fragile and needing nurturing and I had to sort of put my feelings aside to be present to my daughter yet again you know I I don't know how much she knew about what was going on I think she knew there was a trial or something and it was through her nanoline but of course she's only young she doesn't comprehend the vastness of it all you weren't there in person for the trial why did you go

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to the sentencing why did that feel the right thing to do uh so we're given the option with victim impact statements to not write one at all you're able to write one and send it just to the judge to read alone you're able to write one and have someone else read it out for you in court and either be there or not be there or you can write it and be there yourself and I knew it was the most difficult option for me to choose I knew it would be massive to see my father in person but I also knew it was probably the last chance I'd ever have it was my last chance to be able to speak my truth and him have to sit there and listen you know I could show up in the jail and try to speak to him and he might refuse to see me so I feel like there's something really healing to about being witnessed and I'm you know that's probably why they do victim impact statements it's a chance for that person to feel a bit more empowered in the situation did you look at one another as you took the stand so I was already seated in the courtroom and then my father was brought in and I started crying and then they did my auntie and uncle's victim impact statements I was anxiously clutching some lavender and I walked up I was sure I was going to trip or something I was so anxious and took the stand or whatever it's called sat down at the desk and my father turned and just stared at me I'm told it was for quite a long time I have no idea it was timeless for me in that moment everything except for him ceased to exist really and what was the heart of what you said that day that he had no right to take her away yeah I don't understand that level of selfishness why you couldn't have just got a divorce and let those of us who loved her keep her to take away your children's mother take away someone who's so loved by her friends and family and I don't understand that I really don't I don't think I ever will feel it took enormous courage from you to to do that to appear in court and and say that truth thank you it was to take enormous courage I think it drew on everything I had really I was really grateful some really beautiful friends took my daughter so they took her and I was able to go to Sydney on my own which in itself is massive just to even have the flight without having to be a mom and tend to her needs as soon as I finished and I didn't mean any disrespect for the process but I just needed to get out of there I think people understood that I needed nature I needed real air I don't like buildings without real windows and things anyway but I couldn't be in that room with my father anymore does it feel like that was an important step on this journey for you it felt like an important step yeah it was I don't want to compare myself to someone who's in the line of duty and going off to war but that's what it felt a bit like it felt a little bit like that a sense of duty and of knowing that I needed to do it is there any part of you that that feels a new chapter is now beginning with his conviction and jailing and with your book does it feel like you might be moving into the next chapter I feel like I am yeah and I've noticed little things I looked at a photo of my mom and for the first time didn't just cry I actually felt you know love and fondness and sort of a sense of beauty and looking at her photo so I'm hopeful that that will keep evolving the more I keep feeling the grief that it will move through and my daughter can have a mom who's not sad so frequently and we can celebrate and have more joy again well I was thinking your mom's middle name was joy yeah and I imagine what she would want more than anything is for you to feel joy and and your daughter I believe she would want that for us absolutely and I have been saying for years that I want to feel more joy but I haven't been able to access it so I do feel like this book is an important step in getting the story literally out of me and feeling all the feels it was really massive to have to feel it all again and relive it all again so it's you know it's a good form of therapy for sure thank you all for witnessing I think about that that beautiful story about your

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daughter in the park with the little bird and all of the layers of that including the fact that you are being this incredible mother to her thank you sometimes well the best any of us can ever do is but having your own mom taken and then not having someone in her place you're finding that somehow within yourself to be that sort of mother to her yeah thank you one of my friends pointed that out to me and I had to acknowledge that that without a nurturing role model I've still managed to be a sometimes nurturing mother and I do thank my mom's genes for that but Chanel I wish you both so much joy in the future as well as the sadness that I know will always be there thank you thank you so much for being our guest on conversations thank you so much for having me on your program podcast broadcast this is conversations with Sarah Kenoski and Chanel Dawson's book written with Ali Pascoe is called my mother's eyes I'm Sarah Kenoski thanks for listening you've been listening to a podcast of conversations with Sarah Kenoski for more conversations interviews head to the website [abc.net.au slash conversations](http://abc.net.au/conversations) discover more great abc podcasts live radio and exclusives on the abc listen app