

When Tara's life changed forever in an instant one night, the effect on her entire family was horrific



Scott visiting me in hospital



My legs were badly injured

One TERRIBL

Slipping my shoes on, I grabbed my bag and checked the time. "Come on Mum, we'll be late!" I hollered up the stairs. We were going to Mum's second cousin Adam Butler's 21st birthday party, and it was getting late.

"Honestly," my mum Glenda laughed. "You're like the mum sometimes!" It was May 28, 2006, and Mum, my boyfriend, Scott Edwards, 29, and my aunt, Michelle Hurst, 47, were all going to the party.

Only my stepdad, Peter Thomson, couldn't make it. He'd arranged to go camping with his sons, Rory, 22, and Jesse, 16. My own dad had died when I was eight in a

car accident, and Peter had raised me like his own.

The party was fantastic. Mum loved being around her family and she shone as she dragged me up to dance.

We had such fun, that I was sorry when it was time for us to leave.

We set off to walk back home to Auntie Michelle's.

It was just around the corner from the Korumburra-Bena Football Club where the party had been.

I was in front with Scott and, behind us, Mum and Michelle walked arm in arm.

I could hear them cracking up at some joke and turned to look at them. They were like chalk and cheese – Mum a little redhead, her sister a tall brunette – but they both had the same happy, friendly personality.

Suddenly their laughter was drowned out by the sound of screeching tyres.

I turned again, saw bright lights and then ... BANG!

The next thing I knew, I was lying on the cold, hard road and I couldn't move.

I'm paralysed, I thought, before blacking out.

A chopper flew me to The Royal Melbourne Hospital and I woke up the next day with rods and plates holding my shattered legs together. I also had stitches in my hand and a broken rib.

I was in pain and felt foggy with drugs, but all I wanted to know was how Mum, Michelle and Scott were.

Dad told me he hadn't believed it at first

"Scott's got a broken jaw and wrist, but he'll be fine," the nurse said.

"And what about Mum and Auntie 'Shell'?" I asked, but she turned away.

I felt a little stir of fear. Dad arrived soon after. He looked 50 years older as he sat down next to my bed. "Where's Mum? Is she okay?" I asked him.

"Tara, I don't know how to tell you this ..." he began.

Mum was gone. She was only 49.

Dad told me how he hadn't believed it at first. In fact, on the way to see me he had stopped at the coroner's office to double-check.

I felt like my whole world had fallen apart. I wanted to run away to hide from the horrible truth, but all I could do was stare at the

ceiling, fighting back tears.

As the days passed, my legs started to slowly heal, but I blocked out the fact that Mum had died.

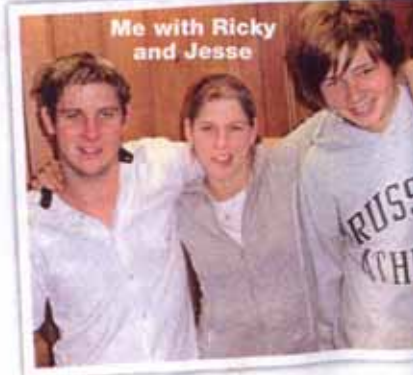
Michelle was fighting for her life as well, but I couldn't even talk about either of them. I wouldn't let anyone speak to me about Mum and I wouldn't read the newspaper reports. My visitors were told not to mention it. I told myself she was on holiday, but then the day of her funeral arrived.

"It would be unwise for you to go," a doctor advised. I'd just had massive skin grafts and I was in agony, but the thought of not being there for Mum broke my heart.

My best friend, Stacey Brinley, 24, had been by my bedside every day since the accident. "I have to go," I



Stacey and me



Me with Ricky and Jesse



Mum (left) and Auntie Michelle



Uncle Trevor with Jackie and Ryan

The driver, Brett Franklin



E moment

told her and she nodded.

My mum had been like a second mum to her. "I'll be there for you," she promised.

On June 2, 2006, Stacey helped me get ready for Mum's funeral. I was in a wheelchair, with a blanket covering the bags and tubes coming from my body.

More than 700 people listened as Dad spoke about Mum. "She was the kind of person who, even if you'd only known her for a few minutes, would treat you like an old friend," he said.

Afterwards, Scott and my

four brothers, Rory, Jesse, Travis and Ricky, carried her coffin out.

"What am I going to do without her?" I wept.

At 3pm, as we released 500 pink and mauve balloons from Mum's graveside, we received devastating news from The Alfred Hospital in Melbourne.

My Auntie Michelle had sadly lost her battle as well.

A few days later, an ambulance took me to her funeral.

We all existed in a black fog of grief. Dad and Michelle's husband, Trevor, seemed to shrink from big, solid men, to broken shadows of themselves.

My cousins, Jackie, 22, and Ryan, 24, were devastated at losing their mum and auntie.

I was released from hospital four weeks after the accident, but still had a long way to go to recover from my injuries.

Nine months after the accident, in February 2007, Brett Franklin, the driver who had destroyed so many lives in an instant, appeared

before Latrobe Valley Magistrates' Court.

Franklin, 28, of Leongatha, Vic, had pleaded guilty to two counts each of culpable driving and negligently causing serious injury, as well as a drink driving charge.

The court was told how he was a man with his own business, a promising sporting career, and a man of good character.

But it was also told how he'd been three times over the legal limit for alcohol, how our family felt, of the tears we'd all shed, and of the cloud of misery, depression and anger that now consumed us all.

Franklin was jailed for 11 years with a minimum non-parole period of seven.

He was also banned from having a driver's licence for eight years.

It was a relief to have it over and done with. I'd like to be able to say that it enabled me to move on with my life, but it isn't that easy.

My days now consist of a series of appointments – with doctors, physios and psychologists – and I still face more surgery.

Dad is keeping himself busy with a new campaign

he's launched in Mum and Auntie Michelle's honour called *Roadsafe Attitude*. It includes recommendations for everything from changes in the law, to better learner driver training.

The rest of the family has good days and bad days – Travis, like the rest of us, still struggles with what's happened.

I feel lucky that I have my family and close friends, they're what keep me going.

Them and this thought: My mum was so strong, even if I have only a quarter of her strength, I'll get through this.

I hope that one day, I'll be able to live my life by the motto that Mum lived hers by: "To love, to have fun and to give to others."

Tara Wells-Thomson, 25, Warragul, Vic.

Tara is donating the payment for this story to Roadsafe Attitude. For more information about the campaign and to add your support, visit www.roadsafeattitude.org



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