

AS I CHATTED to my sister Barbralea, I couldn't help but smile as I realised we'd been on the phone for more than four hours – and it was the fifth call that week.

Hardly surprisingly given that we met for the first time just three years ago. I've always had a great relationship with my two older sisters Kerrie and Joanne and my younger brothers John and Tim, but since Barbralea came into my life I feel happier than ever before.

That's not to say my childhood wasn't fulfilling; my parents were happily married and always showered me and my siblings with love and attention.

But even from a young age, I couldn't shake the notion that my mother was haunted by a dark secret from her past.

She'd wake up in the middle of the night, screaming out in pain as though she'd lost something – or someone.

I'd overhear her and my father arguing in the kitchen at night. "If you don't tell them about her, I will," he'd bark. I knew something was wrong, but I never broached the subject with my parents or siblings – it was easier to pretend our family was perfect.

But, at the age of 29, the life I'd known came crashing down when my mother lost her battle with breast cancer.

The whole family was shattered – she'd always been our rock – but no one was more devastated than my father.

The funeral was extremely tough and, by the time the wake rolled around, everyone had drunk a fair bit of wine.

Dad was particularly tipsy and, as I pulled up a chair next to him, I noticed tears were streaming down his cheeks.

"Dad, it's going to be OK," I told him. At that moment he looked up at me and blurted out the secret he'd kept for my mother's sake for almost 30 years.

"You have a half-sister... Your grandma forced your mother to put her up for adoption when she gave birth at 17."

The room started spinning as I struggled to digest what I'd been told. I immediately called over my grandmother Gloria, and when I asked her if it was true, she confessed everything.

As a strict Catholic, she was horrified to discover her daughter was expecting a baby at the age of 16 after a casual fling with a random guy she hardly knew.

An abortion wasn't an option so, when my mother was five months pregnant, Nan sent her to live at a convent on Sydney's North Shore to avoid it turning into a scandal.

When she gave birth to a girl, my half-sister Barbralea, she didn't even get to hold her own baby before she was whisked away and put up for adoption.

I finally knew why my mother woke up in a cold sweat most nights – she was mourning the child she never knew.

A part of me was furious with Nan but, as soon as I looked into her eyes, I could

tell she was filled with utter remorse.

I pressed her for more – like whether she knew where my sister was – but she explained it was a closed adoption so that sort of information was confidential.

While my siblings were just as shocked by the news, they didn't share my burning desire to track her down, so I resolved to find her on my own.

The problem was, without even a scrap of information to work with, I hadn't even the faintest idea where to start.

One night, a glass of wine in hand, I sat down at my computer and started googling terms like "reunited sisters".

A site called On Reunion popped up; it was full of postings from people who just like me, were desperately trying to track down a sibling they never knew.

I thought to myself, "It's free to use so what could be the harm in trying?"

Along with Mum's full name, I posted details including the year she gave birth and the name of the adoption agency.

I checked my inbox every day hoping for a response, but I only received two and neither led me down the right path; one was from a private investigator claiming he'd provide me with my sister's contact details if I paid him, \$1000 (I was so desperate I nearly agreed, until my husband Adam stepped in). The other was from a woman from Tasmania who believed she could fit the bill.

My heart leapt as I opened the email concerning a photo of her, but my hopes ▶

I'M BEST FRIENDS WITH THE SISTER I NEVER KNEW

Like Oprah, Cheryl Edmond, 39, discovered a half-sister she never knew she had. She tells *Grazia* about her search for Barbralea, 42, and their emotional reunion



Cheryl (left) and Barbralea (right) reunited after 30 years. Cheryl is from the UK, Barbralea is from Australia

were dashed when I realised she was Italian – it couldn't be her.

Six years passed until I received a phone call from the producers of the reality TV show *Find My Family*; they'd read my post and were willing to spend money tracking her down under the condition they could film our reunion if they were successful.

I was apprehensive at first but later agreed. I couldn't ignore the fact that fate had dealt me a lucky hand.

Two weeks later, I received the mind-blowing news I'd been hoping for – they'd actually managed to find her!

There was one (albeit monumental) problem – my sister, who was living in Sydney, had no clue that her



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parents had adopted her. Given the circumstances, the producers agreed that we shouldn't appear on the show, which was a huge relief!

They kindly provided me with her number so I could still call, but I felt sick to my stomach. What if she had a great life and didn't want anything to do with me or my family?

After talking to Nan and my siblings – who encouraged me to go through with it – I finally dialled her mobile number with shaking hands, six years after my search began.

As soon as she picked up I croaked, "Hi, my name's Cheryl. I know this may sound crazy but I'm your sister."

I was met with stunned silence, after which I proceeded to blurt out the entire story – the words came tumbling out. When I didn't get a response, I asked what her name was.

When she told me it was Barbralea, I broke down in tears of joy.

"That's my – our – mother's name." At that, she started crying too. I was overjoyed that she actually believed me and, what's more, seemed happy to know the truth about her past.

We spoke nonstop for the next two hours; it was hard to get a word in!

It was surreal to learn that we had so much in common. We both loved cats, scuba diving and had sons the same age (her youngest, Andrew, is 9,

the same age as my son Thomas), but even more mind-blowing was the fact she had grown up a mere 5km from my home in south-west Sydney before I relocated to Perth with Adam in 2004.

I couldn't believe we'd been so close to each other for most of our childhood; we probably went to the same nightclubs and restaurants.

Best of all, she told me her adoptive parents had taken great care of her.

Overjoyed, we made plans for me to fly from Perth to Sydney to visit her the very same week.

I was sick with nerves as I stepped off the plane and even bought two bottles of wine on the way to her place, figuring we'd need some liquid courage to break the ice!

I needn't have worried; as I pulled into her driveway, I saw she was standing at the front door with outstretched arms. I ran up and we hugged for what felt like an eternity.

When she took a step back, I was shocked to see how much she actually resembled my mother and sisters.

The next five hours were spent catching up on the 30 years we'd spent apart. I was relieved when she told me that, after we spoke on the phone, she sat down for a heart-to-heart with her adoptive parents, who answered every question she had.

They were understandably shocked

that she'd found out but, more than that, they were relieved she'd taken it well. Turns out they'd struggled to conceive for years before turning to adoption and Barbralea says they're all closer than ever before now that the truth is finally out in the open.

I stayed at a friend's place that night but was back at her house by 7am the next day. It was wonderful meeting my two nephews – Andrew and Carl, who's now 15 – and I took loads of photos to show Nan, my brothers and sisters and Adam and Thomas.

When I got home, I couldn't stop gushing about Barbralea. To my absolute delight, Nan decided she wanted to meet her too so, three months later, we flew her up to Perth. They had a tearful reunion and, now, three years on, they're as thick as thieves and have a great relationship.

Welcoming Barbralea into the family has helped Nan overcome the guilt she carried around for so many years. It's also helped each one of us deal with the grief over my mother's death, as we know how happy it would make her to see the daughter she never knew a part of our lives.

We're still getting to know each other, but I couldn't be more thrilled with how things have turned out.

I could have given up on finding my sister so many times, but I'm so glad I persevered; now I have one more person to grow old with and, best of all, she's an amazing friend.

For information on *Oz Reunion*, visit www.ozreunion.com.au



Cheryl (front right, then ages 11) and siblings Kerrie and Joanne had no idea about their secret half-sister Barbralea (left)