Helen Glanville tells: How I fell in love with Sydney's worst white-collar criminal

Helen Glanville first dismissed her future husband as a "criminal" she wanted nothing to do with, but their unlikely romance sparked a 46-year journey of redemption.

Helen Glanville has written a book about her life with Geoff Glanville, a lawyer who became the most notorious white collar criminal in NSW in the '70s. Picture: Keryn Stevens

Before Helen Glanville met her future husband in the 1970s, she disgustedly dismissed him as an "international criminal I wanted absolutely nothing to do with".

She was 20 and a devout Christian. Geoff Glanville was 20 years her senior and a notorious lawyer dubbed "Sydney's worst white-collar criminal", whose daring escape to Brazil to avoid prosecution dominated front-page news.

"He had been a womaniser, he had abandoned his family and disappeared," says the now-70-year-old Helen, whose father had been a client of Geoff's.

“There was only one person who knew where he was and that was his then-mistress. To me, he was irresponsible. I only knew him from the seedy, horrible headlines and I judged him for them.”

But when their lives collided, the young Helen quickly fell in love with the famously scandalous solicitor – who went on to serve nearly six years in some of NSW’s most oppressive jails – and accepted his marriage proposal just three weeks after first setting eyes on him.

It began as a passionate 46-year love affair that saw her endure years of no physical contact in high-security prisons, marry while he was still behind bars and eventually bring them to Adelaide to live out happy, meaningful lives in relative obscurity.

“Geoff was the definition of second chances,” says Helen, who has written a memoir of their life called A Second Chance – A Disgraced Lawyer’s Journey to Redemption.

“There was something magnetic that brought us together.”

Helen Glanville with her book, A Second Chance, about her life with Geoff Glanville, a lawyer who became the most notorious white collar criminal in NSW in the 70s. Picture: Keryn Stevens

Geoff Glanville was a wealthy, dashing lawyer living a luxury lifestyle in Sydney before his dramatic, headline-grabbing downfall. He had a posh home in the exclusive suburb of Wahroonga with his first wife and their three children. He was a council member at elite girls’ private school SCEGGS. His

portfolio of assets included farmland, an inherited Queensland bus firm, a huge bank of properties and a long list of respectable clients.

It was a heady time and the young lawyer was the envy of his friends. But in the mid-1970s, it all came crashing down. Interest rates soared into double figures, Geoff started to feel the squeeze – and broke the law to keep on track.

His private life was also under stress. Geoff was having an affair with his business partner's secretary. And when his criminal life was finally exposed, the press loved every sordid detail, making him front-page news.

With criminal charges breathing down his neck relating to a $700,000 deficit in his trust account, Geoff panicked. He left his family, grabbed $3000 in travellers cheques and escaped to Rio, where he took a flat and laid low.

FINAL EXTRA

Daily Mirror

Tuesday, March 4, 1975

JAILED LAWYER TELLS:

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THE MISTRESS . . . Peta Gurdon

THE HUSBAND . . . Richard Glanville

THE WIFE . . . Wendy Glanville

Richard Geoffrey Glanville was a successful Sydney solicitor. He was a member of the council of the exclusive SCEGGS. He had a lovely home in the exclusive suburb of Wahroonga and a luxury flat in the prestigious Park Regis block in the City. He planned an early retirement.

Today he has nothing. He is in a Brazilian jail and is wanted for questioning by police in Austra

Now, for the first time, he has spoken ab how he feels, about losing everything.

You can read it exclusively in today's Mir on page 14.

FILTH!

KENNEDY ACCUSED

By JIM DRAN

More than 1000 viewers complained today about filth and blue jokes in last night's Graham Kennedy show.

The massive outcry was made to Channel Nine in Sydney and Melbourne.

In the crisis, Glanville became incapable of action and Peta had to arrange things for him

GLANVILLE FLEES TO RIO

The tension in the beautiful Park Regis flat mounted. Geoff Glanville and Peta Gurdon were afraid to answer the phone, open the door.

Arrest in Brazil

Part Four by CRAIG GREET

Both believed Glanville had done nothing wrong. Both believed he had a defence for what was subsequently stated to be deficits of $700,000 in his trust account.

Peta was still working for another solicitor: "And every night I'd come home and find him crying," she said.

Others

Admits

Bought

Geoff Glanville's crimes were front-page news in Sydney in the 1970s.

Newspapers cover the story of Geoff Glanville's flight to Rio.

But his escape plan unravelled with a visit from his lover. She was stopped at the airport with morphine – prescribed to help her deal with pain – and the suspicious Brazilian officers insisted on running a check on Geoff, who had arrived to pick her up. There he was on Interpol's most-wanted list. And Geoff found himself in a Brazilian jail, held without charge at the Australian government's request.

His arrest blazed across the front pages of Sydney's newspapers. "Love trap," they bellowed. "Destitute in Rio, says blonde."

The one-time high-flyer spent the next 14 months in a Rio jail in wretched conditions, with more than a dozen prisoners to a cell.

It was here he was befriended by England's infamous Ronnie Biggs, architect of the Great Train Robbery and prison escapee, who had served time in the same Brazilian jail.

During an interview with an Australian newspaper, the Brazilian ambassador at the time declared that his countrymen "like guys like Biggs and Glanville".

In September 1975, he was at last released and sent home. Helen says he was escorted via San Francisco, where a well-known Australian journalist spotted him looking "pale and drawn".

Geoff Glanville shortly after meeting his second wife, Helen. Supplied

The photos were a front-page scoop for now-defunct The Sun newspaper.

"It was just all about Geoff," says his future wife, who was reading the headlines in shock back in Australia.

"I didn't want to know him. He was irresponsible and made foolish decisions."

Five years before their destined meeting, Geoff – who was Helen's family lawyer – represented her as a 14-year-old in a civil suit over a car accident that left her with a "very nasty scar on my chin".

Geoff never met his young client but viewed photographs of her injury. During the case, he argued that Helen's "chances of ever getting married had been severely reduced" by the accident and secured $2000 in damages.

"Little did he know he would be the one to marry me," laughs Helen.

Geoff was being held in custody after his shameful return from Brazil when Helen locked eyes on the man she would marry – 20 years her senior – for the first time.

Her father, Wesley Warburton, had taken pity on the dad-of-three – who had been struck off the solicitors' roll, declared bankrupt and divorced by his ex-wife – and wanted to ensure that he could spend Christmas 1975 with his children, not languishing in jail on remand for charges of fraud.

"My father was a man who said, 'If I had lost everything, my station in life, my wealth, my family while I was in a prison overseas, I'd like to think somebody somewhere would give me a second chance,'" says Helen. "I thought he was mad and so did the police. They came to our family home and told my father, 'This man's probably going to abscond again.'"

The Christmas deadline came and went but two weeks later, in January 1976, Helen's parents were able to carry out their "crazy" plan to use their house to stump Geoff's $50,000 bail. She met her future husband as her Mum and Dad signed the paperwork to make their bail offer official – and joined him and her parents for a roast lunch at Coles to celebrate.

"January 6 is the Twelfth Day of Christmas, the Epiphany. Geoff said meeting me was 'like an epiphany' for him," says Helen.

With no home of his own, Geoff went to live in a caravan in the Warburtons' backyard. And when Helen's parents and siblings went on holiday, leaving the 20-year-old nurse's aide at home with the bailed offender, she fell hard for the "loving, tender, kind" Geoff.

"We planned meals together, we went to church together, went to the beach together.

"He was magnetic, I fell for him immediately," Helen remembers. "Journalists who write newspapers didn't know him and this wasn't the man of the newspapers. He just was a different man. He'd been humbled – he had been a very, very wealthy man and he had been stripped of everything. He was not the same man who had boarded that flight to Rio."

In her book, Helen calls him a "real-life prodigal". Three weeks after meeting, they were engaged.

"He was not the same man who had boarded that flight to Rio."

"My father said, 'Geoff, I was happy to help you but I wasn't happy to give you my daughter' so he withdrew the bail and put Geoff back in prison," Helen says.

"We did want to marry but he said, 'I don't want you to be a target of the media, as was my wife, children and mistress.' There was a lot of media interest in him."

Despite her parents' objection – and the fact that her lover was behind bars – Helen and Geoff's romance survived and thrived.

She visited him in prison, endured the strict no-contact rules and supported him through his court appearances, where he eventually pleaded guilty to charges of fraud. Geoff begged Helen to boycott his sentencing to avoid becoming the "new angle" in his salacious story.

He faced his fate alone, with no family or friends to support him, and was given a whopping 14-year jail sentence with a six-year non-parole period.

"The long fall from penthouse to prison," bellowed one of the many headlines in the newspapers the next morning.

"I wanted to sit in a corner and cry," says Helen, who faithfully visited Geoff at high-security Long Bay jail and then Goulburn, where the glass-free windows left him so chilled he needed 14 blankets at night.

In his 1979 book, White Collar Crime in Australia, journalist Timothy Hall devotes a whole chapter to Geoff's scandal.

"The book stops at his (prison) sentence but that's not the end of his story. That's why I have written A Second Chance because it appears that this sad, sad person is all by himself," says Helen, whose book tells the stories of their unusual wedding, their early days in Sydney, moving to Adelaide and establishing an award-winning charity to support prisoners and their families. "He just needed a new start."

On September 29, 1979, Geoff was given day release from Cessnock Correctional Centre to elope with his beloved in front of a "rent-a-crowd" of friends who drove from Sydney to Newcastle. His 14-year-old son from his first marriage was best man. None of Helen's family attended – her parents were still protesting the relationship and she decided not to invite her siblings.

"Absolutely not," she laughs. "My sisters had mouths."

She was walked down the aisle by Geoff's former business partner to the strains of Debby Boone's You Light Up My Life and they were given a two-hour honeymoon before Geoff had to return to prison.

"I actually didn't want my parents at my wedding because of the hostility and the coldness," says Helen, who wore a "$50 dress from Myer".

"But all of that dissipated because my parents believed in the institution of marriage and I knew once we had that certificate, things would be different."

Three years after they married, Geoff was at last released from jail. "We had survived the separation of prison," Helen says.

Helen Glanville with her baby son, Rhett. Supplied

In Sydney, they struggled to break free from Geoff's notoriety. They took up a post caretaking for a National Trust property, Experiment Park Farm at Sydney's Harris Park, but that came to a spectacular end when they were snapped by a newspaper journalist, who had been tipped off about the story.

"James Ruse, who built the place in 1789, was a convict and nearly 200 years later there was another convict looking after it," says Helen.

"We saw the humorous side but it was hard to be rejected. We did a good job while we were there. They didn't ask if we had a criminal record so we didn't lie but the truth was he was still on parole."

The fresh start they had been craving came in 1984. Geoff was offered a role with the Offenders Aid and Rehabilitation Service in Adelaide and moved into a home

in Windsor Gardens with Helen, who was seven months' pregnant with their son, Rhett. Weeks later, he was born on a mattress on the floor of their new home.

"Geoff needed a new start, a fresh start. In Adelaide, people didn't know (about Geoff's criminal history). We didn't talk about it, what was the point?'' Helen says.

"That's the past – we can't in life allow our pasts to define us, we all need a second chance.

"We absolutely fell in love with Adelaide – I've got two sons who both barrack for the Crows, what more do you want in life?" In 1988, the family found their slice of paradise at Kenton Valley in the Adelaide Hills, where they could create their own idyllic country lifestyle – raising cattle and selling them to market – just 45 minutes from the city.

They saw it as being blessed by destiny after realising its postcode, 5233, was their respective ages of 52 and 33 at the time. A few months after moving, their baby son Dean was born.

"We had two dams, a couple of horses for the kids," she says. "It cemented us, we had this beautiful property which was our little piece of Australia which we could come home to."

South Australia was the redemption Geoff had craved.

He went on to establish a local chapter of Prison Fellowship Australia, a national charity that provides support to prisoners and their families. It connected Geoff with judges, magistrates and police commissioners.

Geoff and Helen Glanville with their sons, Rhett and Dean. Supplied

Helen says this piqued his longing to return to work as a lawyer.

He launched a bid – backed by high-ranking members of the state's legal community – which made it to the state's Supreme Court. "They didn't reject him, they just said, 'We suggest you go back to Sydney and apply' (but) he didn't want to go back to Sydney," Helen says.

"He had references from some of the highest people in the criminal justice system you could ever wish for but they weren't enough."

Disappointed but not daunted, Geoff focused on his work with the PFA. It had a particular mission to support the children of prisoners – who, like Geoff's three oldest children – are the "innocent victims" of their parents' crimes.

PFA helped to provide support to prisoners with banking or storing their belongings while they served their sentences.

Geoff gained a reputation for being calm and considered – a startling contrast to his "flash, brash youth", says Helen.

In 2015 – after feeling under increasing pressure to change their "parochial" South Australian practices – the Glanvilles "decoupled" from the PFA and founded their own charity, Second Chances SA, which maintains their focus on the needs of prisoners' children. It provides basics such as school uniforms and household furniture, helps teenagers achieve their learner's licence or job-finding skills such as barista training and holds annual camps that give children a unique chance to connect with others in their situation.

While still basking in their new charity's award-winning success, Geoff was diagnosed with prostate cancer.

"He was 80 at the time he was diagnosed," Helen says. "He was starting to age. You can tell when your man is ageing."

Geoff decided not to pursue traditional treatment and instead tackled it in his own way.

"He was very vain, he didn't want to lose his hair," Helen laughs. "He had a great crop of hair right to the end. He was defying the disease, every time he had an MRI the report would come back stable. He was doing well."

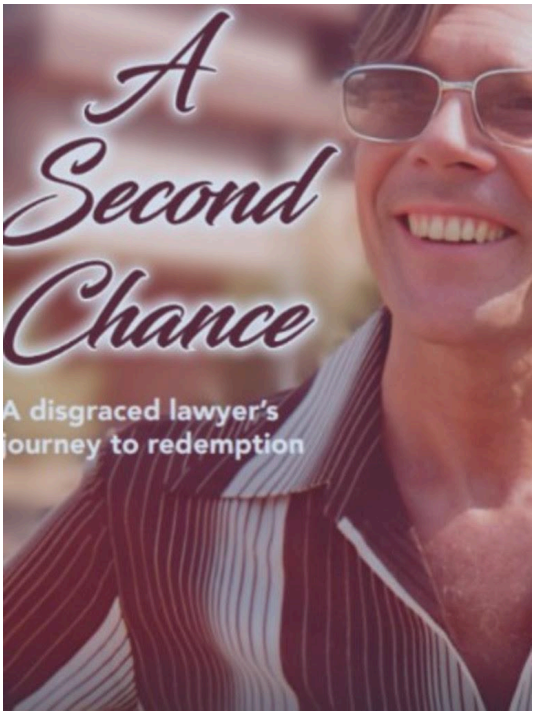
In 2019, Geoff once again found himself caught up in a front-page news story, this time not of his own making.

A cruel wind change put his beloved family home of more than 30 years in the path of the devastating 2019 Cudlee Creek bushfire.

It destroyed everything – family heirlooms, his mother's precious Bechstein piano and all of her family photos. "For Geoff, it was his second total loss," Helen says.

"He'd lost everything before and then to lose everything we'd spent 32 years building, I do think it weighed more heavily on him than it did me. How many total losses can a human take?"

While waiting for their new home to be built in the leafy inner-city suburb of Hackney, the couple bought a houseboat called Eternity, moored at Hindmarsh Island, where Geoff lived a tranquil, peaceful life.



The cover of Helen Glanville's book features a photograph of her husband, Geoff, while he was on release from Cessnock Correctional Centre.

"He went to his happy place," Helen says.

It was on Eternity where Geoff's life story came to an end in 2022, at the age of 86, surrounded by his sons and wife, who held his hands and told him they loved him.

"He had passed from Eternity the boat to eternity in heaven," says Helen, who read her manuscript to her husband 10 days before he died.

“He gave it his blessing. He said, ‘No one could have told my story better than you.’”

Now, Helen says her husband’s legacy lives on – in his family, in the life-changing work of his charity and his own lived lessons of redemption and second chances.

“He spent his life helping people to have their second chance and to move forward. If someone seriously wanted to change and help, he’d be there to help them. That’s what will live on.”

A Second Chance: A disgraced Lawyers Journey To Redemption is out now

HELENGLANVILLE.COM/BUY-BOOK