

Love in your sixties



Jack Nicholson and Diane Keaton in *Something's Gotta Give*
Photo: BOB MARSHAK

Prue Leith thought love was behind her, but, as she tells Cassandra Jardine, she was wrong

Prue Leith giggles as she recalls the moment when her desire returned. "We were driving along a road in Lanzarote, and a shaft of sunshine fell across Ernest's arm. He has strong, pianist's arms, and I wanted to stroke it."

Finding a new man was the last thing on Leith's mind as she set off for the Canary Islands. She thought she was supporting an old friend, Sir Ernest Hall, who had separated from his wife – although the prospect of muttering encouraging words about time being a great healer didn't enthrall her. "I was so busy," she recalls. "I thought Lanzarote would be the pits: all fat, red men, sunburnt women and lager louts. I didn't want to be with someone who was sad. But I fell in love."

And did she stroke that sunlit arm? "Oh no, he would have crashed the car," she says, sounding 68 going on 16. "But a couple of days later, I was meant to be going on to see his wife, Sarah, in France... I never got there."

The woman who banished the rubber sandwich from British Rail, and tackled school food long before Jamie Oliver, had thought romance was behind her. After historian Rayne Kruger, her husband of 30 years, died at the end of 2002, she buried herself in work.

But now, two years after the Lanzarote thunderbolt, Leith is having a wonderful time with Sir Ernest, a concert pianist turned industrialist. She looks happy, youthful and full of energy despite her "creaky knees". Far from being guarded, she loves talking about her "sous chef" – and has even dedicated her latest novel to him.

The book, *Choral Society*, is about three women looking for love in their fifties (she wanted sixties, but the publisher said no) who join a choir and learn to sing again. Metaphorically, this reflects her own experiences, but is it literally the case as well? "No. Ernest told me that everyone can sing. Then he hit a note on the piano and asked me to have a go. After a few tries, he gave up."

Leith admits that her novels are light reads, rather than Booker Prize material. They don't sell nearly as well as her recipe books – Leith's *Cookery Bible* is still going strong after 30 years – but she doesn't need money, and enjoys exploring themes close to her heart, such as work, marriage, loneliness and relationships between women. All these themes crop up again in the new book, in which the troika consists of a widowed food writer who is sacked in favour of a television-friendly male, a lonely businesswoman ruled by her schedule and a champagne-swilling nymphomaniac.

It's not hard to find the author in the first two characters, yet it's the bed-hopping party girl Leith describes as her favourite. "She's the least like me, but I admire her guts," explains a woman who has been enjoying the late flowering of her own fun-loving side.

One reason for Leith to feel liberated is that Rayne, who was 20 years her senior, was unwell for several years. He spent weekdays in his study at their Cotswold home while she dashed around, but every evening at seven they spoke on the phone, which she still misses. "I hadn't realised till he was gone how much I needed to do things for other people," she says. "If I planted a bed in the garden, I wanted him to praise me."

Immediately after his death, she did "the classic thing": "I ran around organising things, putting off grief." Then it crashed down on her. Having always cooked from scratch, she took to scoffing pizza and tinned food, piling on weight." The thing about widowhood, which is a form of depression, is that it takes the pleasure out of everything. If the sun shines, you feel resentful. There seems no point in anything."

Her solace was work. Never a slouch, the woman who already held some sort of record for boards sat on and public appointments accepted took on yet more. When she wasn't rushing between meetings, she was writing, or finding solace with friends.

"It wasn't until Rayne died that I understood friendship," she says. "I had women friends, but they all had specific roles: the ones I had business lunches with, the ones I played tennis with. When I was alone, they scooped me up. My tennis friend took me salsa dancing; I went walking with business friends; and I went on a riding safari with my old friend, Sarah Hall."

After a couple of years, she felt she had "cracked" widowhood. It didn't occur to her to want a new man, or even sex. "Jilly Cooper said that when she turned 60, she wanted to have just one more passionate affair. When Rayne was ill, I thought she was quite right, but after he died I didn't feel any desire."

And then she set off to visit Sarah's husband, an old business associate, in Lanzarote. She had long admired his energy, and marvelled at his piano skills – but romance had never crossed her mind. Yet she returned from the weekend so sure it was true love that she had to tell her children.

Both Danny, a former journalist and speechwriter, who now runs a charity, and Li-Da, an adopted Cambodian orphan who has become a documentary producer, have flats in her Notting Hill house. Even so, it was hard to get them together. "We were all so busy that in the end I arranged a conference call. Li-Da thought I must have cancer, but Dan said immediately: 'You are in love, and it's Ernest Hall.'"

She had feared that the children would mind, but they were thrilled. "Of course," she points out, "it takes a huge burden from them." It is also a relief for Ernest's five children, she thinks, that their 78-year-old father has found a woman who is wealthy in her own right, rather than someone who has hunted him down through the Rich Lists. Things are more awkward with Sarah, although "occasionally we ring each other and complain about him