

HAPPY ENDINGS

I was lying on a beautiful beach in Thailand when I found a lump on my leg. I'd been stressed when I'd left London in August 2003 after breaking up with my boyfriend and fighting a long battle against underfunding for the Refugee Council, the charity I work for.

But three months of travelling through South East Asia with two girlfriends had given me a new zest for life. It was at the end of the trip, as I rubbed on sun lotion, that I discovered what looked like a wart on my calf.

I went to my doctor when I got home, as I wanted to get rid of the ugly mark and show off my brown legs. So I was deeply shocked when I was told I had a malignant melanoma, the most serious form of skin cancer.

A month later, I had the growth removed, which took away most of my calf with it. I hoped that was the end – but it wasn't. Just before Christmas, doctors discovered the cancer had spread to the lymph nodes in my right groin.

I was terrified, but things were about to get worse. In January, a scan showed another tumour in my neck. A specialist discovered I had thyroid cancer, a different form from the skin cancer I was already being treated for.

The next few months were a blur. I had 19 lymph nodes in my groin removed, creating a hole that filled with fluid and had to be drained. My chest was covered in holes where I'd had potentially cancerous moles removed. Then, in March, I was slit from ear to ear as my thyroid gland and all the lymph nodes in my neck were removed.

After surgery, my mum held a mirror up to my face. I was shocked when I saw my swollen,



I cheated death twice then found love

Rachel Thomasson, 29, from London, has just climbed Africa's highest peak. Yet two years ago she was battling two types of cancer

bruised face and my neck held together with 40 staples.

I was at my lowest ebb when my parents took me home to Newcastle-upon-Tyne. But I concentrated on doing yoga and eating mum's dinners and, with some counselling, I began to emerge from the depression. I knew I was getting better when I began to worry less about dying and more about whether I'd ever have another boyfriend!

I wondered who would want a woman covered in scars, one who may not survive the next five years.

Then, last August, I went to a music festival with some friends and met Dave. We clicked straight away. He's sweet, funny and

supportive. I adore him, and we've just moved in together.

In November, I got the all-clear from the thyroid cancer, and two scans have failed to show any further melanoma. So I began to set myself goals – first to get back to work, then to get fit.

When I achieved both, I decided to climb Kilimanjaro,

Africa's highest mountain, to raise money for three charities.

My fellow climber, Allie Rimes, and I are hoping to raise £10,000 from the climb we did in July – where we reached the peak after nine days.

I realised then how happy I am. I have wonderful friends and family, an amazing boyfriend... and I'm still alive!

'I began to worry less about dying'



On top of the world: Rachel and fellow climber Allie on Kilimanjaro's summit

Words Steve Toozee Photos Angela Nott

What's YOUR happy ending?

Tell us! We'll print our favourites – and send the writer a bouquet of flowers and £100. Write with your contact details to: Happy Endings, woman's own, King's Reach Tower, Stamford Street, London SE1 9LS.

