

Chapter One

The Diagnosis

As I sat on the piano bench, teaching little Anna how to run up and down the B major scale with her nimble fingers, I resisted the urge to grab my right boob and yell, “Ow, ow, ow!” at the top of my lungs.

Probably not the most professional way to act.

I shoved my long, blond bangs out of my eyes, breaking into a cold sweat. My breast had hurt for two solid days and I was about to go off the deep end.

March 19, 2009, I wrote at the top of Anna’s notebook. “Okay, Anna, I want you to practice this scale with your left hand this week, okay?” I said through clenched teeth, while her mother, Karin, watched on—oblivious to my torment—in her customary station on the rocking chair next to the piano.

I had found the lump seven months earlier, in August.

“Hey, Ken,” I asked my husband one night, “do you think this is anything?”

“Hmm, it sure is.” He raised his eyebrows. I knew that look in those deep, brown eyes.

“I’m serious. I found this lump.”

“I don’t know. Let me check it out.” He nestled his face into my chest.

This wasn’t going anywhere. Not the way I thought it would, anyway. Of course, he thought it was going somewhere.

“Do you feel it?”

“I sure do.” His hand groped my breast.

What was I asking him again? Oh, yes. The lump. I tried to guide his hand to the spot, but he couldn’t feel it at all. I could barely feel it myself.

After seven months of inactivity, I finally decided to be responsible and get a routine pap smear and breast examination.

“Well, you’re right, it’s probably just a cyst,” Dr. Morrison said, observing my insides up on his screen. He frowned.

“It sure hurts,” I answered. “What would you do? Surgically remove it? Lance it?” I felt a shiver go up my spine at the word “lance.”

“I think I’m going to send you for a diagnostic mammogram.”

Before I knew it, I found myself not only getting a mammogram, but an ultrasound and an extensive biopsy in rapid succession.

Over the next couple of days, I called Dr. Morrison’s office for the results of my tests and kept getting the runaround. I wanted the cyst taken care of as soon as possible. Our family was leaving for California and I wanted to be able to heal from the outpatient procedure enough to be able to ride the roller coasters at Knott’s Berry Farm.

By Friday, I couldn’t wait any longer. This time, I would show up in person and not leave until I had my answer. My 16-year-old daughter, Adriana, sat out in the car waiting, while I marched inside. We both should have been at home packing.

“So, have you heard anything yet?” I asked at the front desk, not quite succeeding in keeping the anger out of my voice.

The receptionist stared at me with a blank look on her face. A nurse walking by, however, saw me and asked, "Oh, did they tell you about the MRI appointment?"

I shook my head.

"We made an appointment for you on the fourteenth of April."

"Fourteenth of April? I've told this office several times that I won't be here then. I'm parking my butt on the beach in California." I looked at my watch. "In fact, we're leaving in three or four hours. You're confusing me with another patient."

"Maria Ann de Haan?"

"Yes." I was losing patience.

"We have you down for an MRI at the hospital."

"What for?" This woman was obviously very confused.

She whispered in my ear, "Maybe you better come back here."

I was annoyed because they hadn't returned any of my phone calls, but had all the time in the world to set up MRIs for me when I was going to be out of town. They weren't listening to me.

I followed the nurse down the hallway to a little office and sat down.

"Dr. Chen will come and talk to you."

"I normally see Dr. Morrison."

"Well, Dr. Morrison is out right now and Dr. Chen will talk to you instead."

Waiting, waiting, waiting. This cyst was bloody interfering with my life.

Adriana, still out in the car, was probably wondering what in the world had happened to me.

I was herded down to another room, the same one where Dr. Morrison had performed his exam ten days earlier.

Dr. Chen was a short, Chinese man who didn't look to be any older than 20. He handed me a thick stack of papers and said, with no preamble, "You have advanced breast cancer."

"Pardon me?"

"Advanced." His accent was pretty thick, but I heard that word loud and clear.

I looked down at the pathology report in my hand. These words might as well have been written in Chinese, his language, for all the sense they made to me. I honed in on the first one. "What does 'invasive poorly differentiated ductal carcinoma with abundant necrosis' mean?" I asked Dr. Chen, calm as can be.

"Advanced."

"How about 'poor tubule formation 3/3, high nuclear grade 3/3 and low mitotic rate 1/3'?"

"Advanced."

This guy was starting to tick me off. *Pick a new word already.* "Nottingham Grade. I don't know what that is. It says I have 2 out of 3."

"Advanced."

I didn't cry at all, because I didn't believe he knew what he was talking about. It was a cyst. There had to be some kind of mistake.

Realizing I wasn't getting anywhere, I stood up. Dr. Chen followed me out to the receptionist's desk.

I think he was waiting for me to break down into hysterics and when I didn't react in a typical fashion, he patted me awkwardly on the shoulder, and went about his merry way.

I asked the receptionist who I had to call to cancel my MRI appointment and went *my* merry way out to the car.

"Well, what did the doctor say?" Adriana asked me, clearly petrified to hear the answer.

“Apparently, I have *advanced* breast cancer.” I couldn’t get over the fact that he must have said that word about seventeen times.

My daughter burst into tears.

I still couldn’t cry and snapped into practical mode. “Well, we can go home and tell the family or we can go to Fred Meyer and pick up lunch meat to put on sandwiches.”

She sniffled and looked at me like I was crazy.

When she didn’t answer, I broke it down for her again: “Go home or sandwiches?”

“Uh... I don’t... *sniff, sniff*... know...”

“Let’s get some turkey.”

I must have been in shock. I still haven’t really figured out why I reacted the way I did except that I’m a pretty down-to-earth person, we *were* going on vacation for a few weeks, and I wanted to make sure we had food in the car. What can I say? That’s just the way I am. I didn’t have time to fall apart now, advanced breast cancer or not.

At home, Ken and I disappeared into our bedroom while Adriana holed up in her room to hide her swollen eyes from her brothers.

“The doctor—some young guy about 20—said that I have advanced breast cancer.”

Ken wrapped me in a big hug.

“Do you think we should cancel our road trip?” his muffled voice asked from somewhere in the vicinity of my armpit.

I pulled away. “Are you kidding me? No way. You know how much I love California. I’ve looked forward to this trip for over a year. We’re going. We can sit and be sad here at home or we can sit and be sad at the beach. What’s to think about?” I love Washington state, but the rain was getting to me.

“Mer, at least call Joe and see what he says before we hop in that car, okay?” he responded, referring to the naturopath I had seen for years. “I will, but we’re going on this trip,” I said firmly. “But we do have to tell the boys now.”

We called them into the living room. Thirteen-year-old Jonathan cried on my shoulder while we both sat on the couch. Fifteen-year-old Michael held it in like me, stood up quickly, and slipped into his room. Ken followed him.

I next dialed my friend Tami, whom I had nicknamed Vern back in ninth grade. “Hey, Vern, how’s it going?”

“Well?” She told me later that she knew the minute I called that it was bad news.

“I have advanced breast cancer.”

Ten minutes later, Tami was standing in front of me.

“I still can’t believe it,” she wailed as she hugged me tight.

“That makes two of us, sister,” I agreed.

When we pulled apart, I looked down.

“Vern, where are your shoes?”

“I left them at my mom’s. I left my wallet, too. The second we hung up, I had to come right over here.”

Oh boy, it looked like my greatest friend in the world was taking it harder than me. I would have to hold her up.

“I still can’t believe this is happening.”

“Vern, this is the way it is. We’ll get through this.”

Tami went to pick up her shoes and wallet from her mom’s; Ken and I threw our three kids and the turkey sandwiches into the car and drove down to Angels Camp, California in a daze.

In the condo, resting after our 18-hour drive, I sat on the couch with my feet up. The kids rested for about five minutes and then left for the outside pool with their bathing suits on and towels in hand.

Ken sidled up to me. “Hey, Mer, what are you doing?” He looked like he had been sucker-punched.

“Sitting here pretending my life is still normal.” I moved my feet.

He plunked down on the couch next to me and asked, “Have you thought of journaling? It might help you through this.”

“I don’t want to write about cancer. I’m going to keep pretending I don’t have it.”

“At least write down some stuff in case you decide to write a book about it later. You just bought that laptop.”

“You mean for that silly novel I wrote that will never see the light of day?” I heard the desperation in my voice, but I couldn’t stop myself. “A book about cancer. Are you nuts?”

“You never know.”

“Ken, I don’t want to write a book or journal or anything else about having cancer,” I snapped at him. “Just because I’m a writer doesn’t mean I need to talk about it all the time or let other people know what I’m thinking. I still can’t believe it’s true.”

“I know, neither can I,” Ken responded. “I’m still in shock and keep thinking that I’m going to wake up one of these mornings and it’s all going to be a bad dream, but it *isn’t*.”

“I don’t feel sick. How can I have cancer? I eat all that health food. Walk for miles every other day. Use that Total Gym. Total bunch of hoey. What good did it all do me?”

“Just think about what I said, Mer, about taking notes.”

It’s taken everything I’ve got just to get through all these mammograms and biopsies. The medical stuff is only going to get worse when we get home.” I tried not to think of bald heads and the inside of a toilet. Against my bidding, a vision of Campbell Scott in the movie *Dying Young* came to mind.

“I know.”

“The subject’s over. I don’t want to talk about it anymore.” We were on vacation, for Pete’s sake, and were supposed to be having fun.

If only we had known about all the medical insurance problems awaiting us back in Washington, we might have stayed in California.

Back at home, in the land of reality, Ken and I sat in the lobby of Dr. Williamson's office, the breast cancer specialist that my naturopath, Joe, recommended. Adriana and Michael had wanted to stay home. Jonathan sat with us and read his book, *Twilight*, while we pored over the fine doctor’s résumé.

“Look, he’s been on 20/20 and ABC News,” Ken pointed.

“Great. Cha-ching. This is going to cost us a fortune,” I whispered.

While Jonathan continued his book out in the lobby, Ken and I were ushered into Dr. Williamson’s office. I surreptitiously counted his diplomas. There were 14 of them.

Dr. Williamson had white hair and a bushy mustache. His kind brown eyes appraised me from the other side of the room.

“Well, Maria, let’s go over the pathology report,” he advised.

I swear, if he said “advanced” one time, I would go through the ceiling.

“What does poorly differentiated mean?” I asked him.

“It means that your cells, particularly the breast cells, are totally different from a normal cell.” He got out a piece of paper and proceeded to tell us—for *three hours*—all about breast cancer while Jonathan probably wondered if his parents had entered the Twilight Zone.

Maybe we had.

I felt like my brain was going to explode from information overload. About the only words that really stuck out in the whole conversation were: Mastectomy. Scheduled for May 12.

Dr. Williamson decided that I needed another test, an MRI, to make sure that nothing was missed on the first three tests I had done—the mammogram, ultrasound, and stereotactic biopsy.

Erg.

On May 8, Ken and I returned to Dr. Williamson’s office. I was nervous because the mastectomy was looming in four short days and I wanted to ask the big kahuna to help me decide whether or not to do reconstruction. Before I could ask my question, though, Dr. Williamson told us that the surgery would be cancelled and I would now need to do chemotherapy right away.

“What?” My heart sank. All the emotional ups and downs of deciding whether or not to a) chop my boob off, b) replace it right away with a fake one, or c) ignore it all and do nothing, and now we were discussing chemo already? The Twilight Zone just kept on coming.

“According to this latest pathology report, your cancer is now considered locally advanced—Stage III—and the most dangerous thing is not the cancer in your breast, but the spread of it to your lymph nodes.” He pointed to the x-ray of my right breast and armpit.

“The first report said I have Nottingham Grade of 2 out of 3,” I said. “Now, this one says 7 out of 9. I’m still not really sure what that is.”

“Well, Maria, I’d say that you really have 8 out of 9 or 9 out of 9. The Nottingham Grade is a tool that we use to measure the prognosis and the severity of your cancer.”

Holy crap. Here I had sweated all week about whether or not I should do reconstruction. Now, this doctor was telling me I was toast.

On May 12, four agonizing days later, instead of getting my mastectomy done as previously planned, I sat in the waiting room with Ken for the technician to photograph my liver to see just how burned a piece of toast I really was.

I tried to calm my stomach. The Barium lunch I had consumed along with the Barium snack was making me feel like I had eaten three pizzas for lunch.

Ken tried to read the *ESPN* magazine to me. I tuned him out.

The front door to the waiting room opened and a gray-haired man shuffled through the opening and stood there uncertainly as his eyes adjusted to the dimmer light inside.

A woman three chairs down from me hustled to her feet. I looked up in surprise. The old bird was pretty spry for her age. She clunked past us with her walker, the oxygen tank trailing behind her.

The gray-haired man shrank back when he saw her stomping toward him.

“You’re half an hour late!” the woman barked at him, not worrying about the fact that the waiting room was full of people.

“I’ve been out in the parking lot for half an hour,” he replied sourly.

“Where?” she demanded.

They continued to argue on the way out the door. “I’ve been here waiting... well, I’ve been there waiting....”

I turned to my husband and said, “Promise me you’ll just come right in and get me.”

The young man next to me snickered.

“Ken,” I whispered fiercely, “hand me that piece of paper.” We already had a huge folder stuffed full of papers from this whole cancer business.

“Which one?” he answered.

“Any of them. Quick.” I snapped my fingers. I found a pen in my purse and furiously tried to recapture the funny moment down on the back of one of the pages of the pathology report. Maybe I could journal about this trying time after all. If it didn’t turn into a book one day, at least I’d have an interesting scrapbook to show Ken and the kids.

The three of us—Ken and I and the snickering young man—watched through the floor-length window as the old couple continued to berate each other on the way to their car.

“My goodness, I don’t know if I want to get old,” I said to the two of them. Then again, just after being handed a diagnosis of advanced breast cancer, I knew I wanted to live a little longer than age 42.