

THE  
YEAR OF  
GOODBYES  
AND  
HELLOS

*A Novel*

KELLY IRVIN



THOMAS NELSON  
*Since 1798*



*The Year of Goodbyes and Hellos*

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[[To Come]]

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*In Memoriam*

*To Rosenda, Mary Sue, Gloria,*

*and to all the cancer patients who didn't get enough time.*

*Dedicated to Dr. Irene Kazhdan and all the doctors,*

*nurses, and researchers who specialize in oncology,*

*thus making more time for their patients.*



THOMAS NELSON

*Since 1798*

## KRISTEN

Delivering the news required a certain finesse combined with brutal honesty. My technique had been honed over the years. *Lean into it. Do it fast. Make eye contact. Adopt a kindly, caring tone.* Because I did care. Because it sucked. Then brace for what came after the words that would irrevocably change a patient's life.

"You have uterine cancer, Mrs. Sedaris."

Pausing to let the diagnosis sink in, I laid the PET scan report on my desk. My words rattled around in the tiny exam room. Angst sucked up all the air, making it hard to breathe.

My patient, a physical therapist, avid cyclist, and vegan, who glowed with health, stared at the framed North Dakota Badlands photo on the wall behind me. Red blotches blossomed on her throat. She tugged her jean jacket tighter and buttoned it. It provided poor protection against a cold draft. It was a mere sixty-six degrees in San Antonio on the springlike first day of February, so the arctic air temperatures maintained in the Texas Cancer Care Clinic couldn't be excused.

Still, she said nothing. There were no words to be had.

Mrs. Sedaris's husband, seated in the chair next to her, clasped her

hand. His big fingers, covered with fine blond hair, entwined with her thin ones. “So what now, Dr. Tremaine?” Only a slight quiver in his deep bass voice gave him away. “Will she have to have a hysterectomy?”

*She* was twenty-six years old and the mother of an adorable toddler with the same silky blonde hair and indigo eyes. She’d shown me pictures of the little girl named Shiloh on her phone the first time we’d met after a referral from her gynecologist.

“Yes. Given that the cancer has metastasized, the surgeon will remove your uterus, ovaries, and fallopian tubes.” She would be thrown into early menopause. Sugarcoating the situation would not help. Most of the time it made things worse. “We have three gynecological oncology surgeons on staff here. An appointment with one of them is next. After you’ve met with him, we’ll map out a treatment that could include radiation and likely chemotherapy once you’ve recovered—”

“But we want another baby. We’re trying . . .” Mrs. Sedaris’s voice broke. “We were trying when the bleeding started.”

“I’m sorry.”

Sometimes those were the only words I could offer. Leaving the uterus and other female organs intact and hoping chemotherapy would eradicate her cancer wasn’t an option—not in my book. Mrs. Sedaris’s symptoms of breakthrough bleeding and abdominal pain didn’t necessarily point to cancer. Her menstrual periods had always been irregular and painful. By the time her ob-gyn sent her for a CT scan, the cancer had spread. Now my job was to utilize all means available to keep my patient alive.

*But you’ll be alive, I wanted to say. You’ll be here for little Shiloh and your husband, and all those who love you and whom you love.* But I didn’t. Because no oncologist could guarantee that. Not with a sneaky, insidious, smarmy disease that constantly reinvented itself, overcoming every medical tool devised to destroy it. Not when her cancer had

spread. She would be in treatment for the rest of her life—however long that might be.

I held out a clipboard with a form that would allow us to send a tissue sample to a company for molecular profiling after her surgery. “With that information we can determine the best treatment options following surgery.”

Mrs. Sedaris didn’t take it. Mr. Sedaris, also blond and blue eyed but tanned the way a coach who spent his afternoons on the football field would be, did it for her. His chair creaked under his brawny weight, the legs spindly behind his massive calves.

My phone dinged. I took a quick peek. Maddie. When was the last time I talked to my oldest daughter? Our weekly calls had turned into sporadic texts sometime last semester—or maybe it was the semester before. Guilt’s sharp arrow tips tried to pierce my thick physician’s hide and then fell, broken, to the ground. She needed help with her rent after her apartment roommate bailed out at the last second to live with her boyfriend. Which was why I’d been in favor of dorm living. My husband, Daniel, had sided with Maddie. Something he’d done a lot lately.

*Think about it later.* Later would come in the middle of the night. I added her request to my mental to-do list without responding.

“It’s highly treatable,” I offered as I handed Mr. Sedaris a pen. “We should get started as soon as possible though. When we finish here, my medical assistant will take you to the surgeon’s scheduler. I’ve already talked to him. He’s expecting to do a preliminary evaluation early next week or as soon as he can squeeze you into his schedule.”

“That’s good.” He laid the clipboard in his wife’s lap and placed the pen in her hand. She scribbled her signature without reading the form. He patted her arm. “That’s good.”

In time they would realize that *highly treatable* didn’t equate to *highly curable*. Patients could only take so much in one sitting. “Give

me your phone, and I'll put my cell phone number in it. Call me if you need me."

She met my gaze for the first time since I'd said the words *uterine cancer*. "You'd do that?"

The clinic where I practiced had a terrible habit of making it difficult for patients to reach their physicians. Messages disappeared into great voids. I needed to be accessible to my patients. It was my job. "Put yours in mine too. That way I'll recognize it when you call."

My phone dinged again. Not Maddie, surely. She knew better.

No. it was Daniel. My husband wanted to remind me we were attending his mother's seventy-fifth birthday celebration that evening. He'd reminded me three times before I left the house at seven earlier in the day. And two times the previous night after I'd turned off the reading lamp, rolled over with my back to him, and tugged the sheet up around my shoulders.

I ignored his text. Ignored him. That's what he'd say. But I wasn't ignoring him, just leaving my response for a more appropriate time. I was with a patient. I'd respond later. Which would be about the time I arrived at the house and found him pacing, ready to go.

The door opened. My medical assistant, Shay, stuck her head in. "Sorry to interrupt. Methodist is calling about Mr. Chavez."

My hospitalized patient with late-stage colon cancer. I took the phone. "Shay, please take Mr. and Mrs. Sedaris to see Dr. Rodriguez's scheduler." I turned back to the couple. "Once we have a date set for your surgery, we'll schedule you back with me."

Mr. Sedaris stood. He took his wife's arm and helped her up, like she was an elderly woman in need of a cane or a walker. I held out my arms. "See you soon."

She accepted my offering and walked into them. I hugged her tight. Her thin body shuddered. I heaved a breath, let go, and stepped back. "See Dr. Rodriguez and then we'll make a plan, okay?"

“Okay.” She gave me a watery smile, the first since I’d come into the room. “See you soon.”

Trust and hope lived in those words. The seeds had been planted. By our next appointment she’d be over the shock and ready to participate as a member of the team responsible for keeping her alive.

At least I hoped she would. I’m not a big proponent of the so-called power of positive thinking, but a patient determined to fight for survival often fared better. I don’t know why. I don’t really care why. Only the results matter. “See you soon.”

I stepped out into the hallway with Shay. She beckoned to the couple. “This way.” She glanced back at me. “You’re about an hour behind now.”

The clinic insisted on scheduling my patients fifteen minutes apart. “How bad is it?”

“Mrs. Cochrane says she’s bringing her sleeping bag next time, and Mr. Johnson thinks we should provide a lunch buffet.”

“I’ll catch up.”

“Uh-huh.” Shay had been my medical assistant for five years. She knew better. “Take your call. I’ll bring Mrs. Cochrane back as soon as I finish with these folks.”

Shay knew I would do my best for the sake of my patients sitting in a crowded waiting room, watching the minutes tick by, some fuming, some numb, some resigned. It shouldn’t be like that, but I couldn’t fix it. This was the price I paid for practicing in a large corporate clinic.

As soon as I finished with the situation at the hospital, I double-timed to the next exam room where a patient with pancreatic cancer had been waiting for half an hour. I put my hand on the knob. My phone dinged. Not Daniel again. He knew better. I let go of the knob and checked.

My sister, Sherri. When was the last time I’d talked to her? She texted me on New Year’s Day from her son Cody’s house in Fayetteville, where she was spending the holidays. We used to talk more, but time



seemed to get away from us—or me. I glanced at my smartwatch. Ten thirty. She should be sitting crisscross on the rug in her kindergarten classroom in Kerrville, reading the *Little Blue Truck* to her students. Or trotting in a single-file line to recess. Her life as a teacher had always struck me as idyllic. Not fair, I knew, but so hopeful and full of tomorrows. She gave her students the key that opened the door to a lifelong love of reading. What a gift.

Know yr busy but need to talk. When u can

Tonight? No. She went to bed so early, and I worked. I stabbed a response with my rapid-fire index finger.

**Will try to call u on lunch break. are u on cafeteria duty today?**

Not at school. In car. Doctor's office parking lot

The hair on my arms prickled. A cold breeze wafted over me that had nothing to do with the overactive AC. My older sister had always been the picture of health. She loved Zumba, Billy Blanks Tae Bo, and spin classes. Her weight was perfect for fifty-two, likely so were her cholesterol and blood pressure. Last year she finished fourth in the San Antonio Rock 'n' Roll Marathon's female fifty to fifty-five age division.

**Why? what's up? are u sick?**

Suddenly light-headed, I waited, staring at the little twitching bubbles that meant she was typing a response.

Not sick. Have cancer

## S H E R R I

I didn't mean to blurt it out like that. Bitter bile rose in my throat. I leaned into the heat blasting from my Equinox's vents. February in South Texas was mild compared to the rest of the country, but I still shivered. The numbness receded, leaving room for a wave of nausea. The sense of unreality that had set in when the oncologist told me I needed to have a biopsy two weeks ago had painted the world in drab grays and bruised blues. It never really abated, even though I'd been sure the masses revealed in the pleural lining of my lungs by the CT scan would be benign. CT scan results could be wrong or simply confusing. *WebMD* said so.

Biopsies apparently were less so. *Adenocarcinoma*. I had to google that word. But the chest CT scan didn't reveal the whole story. We still needed to know where the cancer originated. Thus the PET scan. I'd had so many medical appointments and missed so much work, my munchkins were starting to ask me questions. Questions I didn't want to answer. Did kindergartners really need to know their teacher had a life-threatening disease? Did their parents want them to learn about death and disease at the tender age of five?

Not likely.

I leaned forward. My seat belt fought me. I fumbled with it. Finally, it complied and disengaged. I laid my forehead on the wheel and closed my eyes. Another wave of nausea ripped through me. I jerked upright, frantic, shoved open the door, and heaved onto the asphalt. Heaved until nothing more came up.

I glanced around to make sure no one had witnessed my ignominious display of weakness, then closed the door gently. The parking lot hummed with activity. Business was good at Kerrville's medical arts building. Fortunately, none of the patients trotting through the lot were close enough to see my impromptu performance.

The smell. The taste in my mouth. The memory was so vivid, I gagged again and again. I grabbed a tissue and held it to my mouth.

*My stomach lurched at the sound of retching. The grilled cheese sandwich and strawberry milkshake I'd eaten for lunch threatened to come back up. Mom didn't have much in her belly. A few swallows of the milkshake and toast I'd made and insisted she try to eat. They both came up.*

*Her face gaunt and her skin an ugly green, she leaned back against her pillow and handed me the red plastic beach bucket. Breathing through my mouth, I gave her a tissue. I would never drink a strawberry milkshake again.*

*She dabbed at her mouth. The tissue still clutched in one hand, she pushed the scarf that covered her bald head back into place with her other hand. "Sorry, baby. I know this is not how you planned to spend spring break."*

*It wasn't like I planned to go to Corpus with my friends. A bunch of seniors on their last spring break before graduation. I had a job at Dairy Queen. We needed the money. A guy I hardly knew had agreed to cover my shift. "It's okay, Mom." I offered her a sleeve of saltine crackers. "Try to eat a few crackers. They'll settle your stomach." Now I sounded like a nurse.*

*Her mouth worked. She closed her eyes. She was so skinny her high cheekbones looked sharp enough to cut wood. Her long-sleeve Henley shirt, big enough for two of her, hung on her body. "Maybe in a while."*

*“Drink some Sprite then.”*

*She managed a few swallows. Two minutes later it came back up.*

*“Let me call the doctor, Mom.”*

*“He’ll just want to write another prescription we can’t afford to fill. Let me sleep. I’ll feel better after I sleep.”*

*She closed her eyes. I climbed onto the bed and snuggled close, my arm around her shrunken body as if I could somehow infuse some of my healthy cells into hers. Please, God, let it be true. Let her feel better after she sleeps.*

*Bong, bong, bong.*

The grandfather clock’s chimes in my head struck again and again. The sound reverberated. I clasped my hands to my ears. It didn’t help. It first started doing that when Mom was diagnosed with cancer. I’d learned at fourteen that time was finite.

*Bong. Bong. Bong.* Not the pretty tunes one would expect. More the “Don’t Ask for Whom the bells Toll, they Toll for Thee” vibe.

They woke me in the middle of the night. While watching my children play on the beach or walking across the stage to get their high school diplomas. Time simply ran out while we were busy doing something else—usually something mundane like flossing our teeth or trimming a brisket.

*Bong. Bong. Bong.*

*Seriously, God?* Dad left us when I was ten. Mom died when I was eighteen. I took over as mother and father to Kris. *Wasn’t that enough?* I squinted against the afternoon sun beating through the windshield. *Are You listening?*

Of course He was listening. And biding His time. He had a plan. *Do You mind sharing it, Mr. Yahweh?*

I knew what He was thinking. *Getting mighty big for your britches, blondie.*

Kris’s ringtone blared Bruce Springsteen’s “Born to Run.” I jumped. The memories sank into a bottomless chest filled with everything from

a first lost tooth to fender benders to a single DUI (son number two) to weddings and the births of five my grandchildren.

I sucked in air and let it out slowly. *Get it together, blonde. You can do this.* I stabbed the green circle on my phone. “Hey.”

“Don’t hey me. What do you mean, you have cancer?”

“You’re an oncologist. I’m sure you’re familiar with the disease.”

“*Sherri Anne.*”

Kris filled those three syllables with forty-plus years of good times, bad times, and everything in between. The two of us against the world. When Dad left. When Mom got sick. When Mom died. Kris and I had each other when we had no one else. I was the big sister. I took the lead. “Sorry. Yes. Ovarian cancer.” I resorted to my big-sister voice. My everything-will-be-all-right voice. “I just came from reviewing the PET scan results with my oncologist.”

The silence that followed was fraught with meaning. The bewilderment, anger, disbelief, and outrage would boil over no matter how hard Kris tried to harness it. Not because I had cancer. But because I’d failed to tell her earlier. “What the . . . ? How am I just now hearing about this? You’ve had a PET scan and didn’t tell me? Which means you had any number of exams and appointments leading up to the scan and the appointment today to get the results.”

Her voice didn’t rise. Kris wasn’t a screamer. It went deadly quiet, lower and lower, until it became a whisper so loaded with pent-up emotion it’s a wonder my phone didn’t melt in my hand. “You didn’t tell me. You went through this alone. You never said a word. Why?”

“Why? You know why. Because I—”

“You didn’t want me to worry? I’m your sister. It’s my job to worry about you. It comes with the territory—”

“Okay, I wanted to wait so as to have as much information as possible before I told you. And you’re so busy with your patients. You don’t need another one.” I leaned back against the headrest and closed my eyes.

The memories, like a movie whirring on old-timey film on a reel, threatened to resurface. Mom's friend shaving the few wispy hairs left on her head while Mom told us how cool she would be when the dog days of summer hit.

Mom assuring us she'd be fine. We'd be fine. We'd all be fine.

Mom crying out in her sleep when the morphine drip wasn't enough.

Mom whispering our names before she closed her eyes and never opened them again.

We weren't fine. I was eighteen and Kris, fourteen. Not even close to fine.

"Did they give you a copy of the results?"

The two offending pages with their damning words laid on top of my copy of Louise Erdrich's *The Sentence*, like silent, accusing passengers I wanted to drop off at the next bus stop, sending them to a destination far, far away. "Yes."

"Read me the impression on the last page."

"Kris."

"I know, honey. Do it, please."

The anger had leaked from her voice, replaced with a tenderness that brought the tears I'd been fighting all day—for weeks—to the surface. "*There's no crying in baseball.*" It was a line Kris and I used to throw at each other when we were young, married, and raising kids, trying to navigate being wives, mothers, and professionals. We had no role models for parenting. Kris called me late at night after everyone was in bed so she could quote lines from the last movie we'd seen in the theater together, *A League of Their Own*.

We were baseball fanatics—the one thing we'd inherited from a father who'd been a semipro baseball player more absent than present in our lives. Kris had a gift for mimicry. She could do Tom Hanks's Coach Jimmy Dugan at the drop of a hat. I'd answer the phone, exhausted from a day of teaching, feeding my kids, bathing them,

putting them to bed, packing lunches, cleaning up the kitchen, and hear Coach Dugan's voice: *"It's supposed to be hard. If it wasn't hard, everyone would do it. The hard is what makes it great."*

Words to live by.

I swallowed hot, salty tears, sniffed, and picked up the report.

"Hypermetabolic adenopathy consistent with metastatic disease involving the subcarinal . . ." A medical degree came with a minor in a foreign language that no patient could be expected to pronounce, let alone understand. Was it intentional? To give it mystery or make it worth the prices they charged? Now I would have to learn this language, whether I liked it or not.

I cleared my throat. "Cardio . . . iphrenic angle, upper abdominal, retro-peri-toneal levels—"

"Just a minute." Shuffling sounds, muffled talking. Seconds ticked by. More shuffling. "Okay, go on." Now she sounded breathless, agitated. "Is there more?"

"Yes." Unfortunately. This part I could translate, even with my meager knowledge of this foreign language. Big honking tumors on my ovaries. Why didn't they simply say that? "Large bilateral adnexal hypermetabolic masses concerning for ovarian primary. End of impression."

"All right. Got it. Give me your oncologist's name and number."

I'd heard this Kris voice before, when she took a call from a patient in the old days when we used to get together on weekends: two married couples with kids. It was her medical professional voice.

"I don't understand. I did my annual pelvic and pap smear religiously." We both did because we knew our family history put us at greater risk. "I did all the right things. How did this happen?"

"Because pap smears don't catch ovarian cancer. There is no reliable diagnostic tool for it. Doctors tend to diagnose the symptoms as everything else first. Sometimes they think—the men at least—that women have PMS or bad periods."

“My doctor thought I had IBS. Then I started losing weight, even though I felt full when I wasn’t eating that much. Plus, I had to pee all the time. Then he thought it was diabetes.”

He’d considered a boatload of possibilities before he sent me to my gynecologist.

“Classic ovarian cancer symptoms, yet most doctors don’t even have it on their radar.”

“Tell me about it.”

“So give me your oncologist’s name and number.”

“Why?”

“Give them to me. Please.”

Despite the *please*, Kris’s tone had an edge. Doctors were used to getting their way. But I was the older sister. “I’m a big girl. Your plate is already full. I don’t need you to ride to my rescue.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. This is my world and now you’re living in it.” Kris was definitely headed toward a snit. “Shut up and give me the name and number.”

Tears mingled with the snit. Kris simply did not cry. *There’s no crying in baseball or cancer.* I complied.

“I’ll call her and ask her to do a referral to an oncologist and a gynecological-oncology surgeon at my clinic here in San Antonio.” Her doctor voice made another appearance. “We’ll need your medical records transferred here.”

“Why?” I sounded like a broken record. “I can’t run back and forth to San Antonio for my appointments. I have a job to do here. I have students—”

“You have stage 4 ovarian cancer, Sissy. Didn’t your oncologist tell you that?”

No. She’d given me the results in an earnest, concerned voice, like a parent reviewing a child’s less-than-stellar report card. “She said it was highly treatable.”



A sound like a snort or a cough reverberated over the line. Or was it a muffled sob?

I stopped breathing. The three-story stone-and-glass building and everything else in front of me blurred. The grandfather clock's *bong, bong, bong* in my ears made it hard to think. My hands hurt. I focused on my fingers. They gripped the steering wheel so tightly my knuckles had turned white.

*Breathe through your mouth—one, two, three, four. Hold, one, two, three, four. Breathe out through your mouth—one two, three, four. Again. Again. Again.*

“Sherri?” Kris’s voice penetrated the thick wool that encased my head. “Sissy? Stay with me.”

“I’m here.”

True, but I wanted to be somewhere else. Sitting on the beach, sand between my toes, sun on my face, feeding bread to the seagulls, listening to their calls over the steady, roaring ebb and flow of the waves. Or sitting in a rocking chair in my daughter’s living room, my grandkids crowded on my lap, reading *Llama Llama Red Pajama*.

How many more times would I be able to do either one?

“That means we need to move quickly.” Kris was talking.

I tried to make sense of her words. *Keep up, keep up*. She was always smarter than I was. Smart was good. Smart was what I needed now. She excelled at math and science while I buried myself in books. She had a full-ride scholarship to UT-Austin. Blew the wheels off everyone else in medical school. “You’ll see one of my oncologist colleagues so we can get your port installed early next week. You’ll do three rounds of chemotherapy followed by the surgery and then three more rounds—”

“We can do that here in Kerrville.” My three-bedroom Hill Country house on a quiet street a few blocks from school was old and in need of renovation, but it was all mine. I bought it when my

ex-husband, Chance, and I sold our house and split the proceeds. “I live here, remember?”

“The statistics are clear. Having the surgery you need performed by a gynecological oncology surgeon greatly improves your chances of survival. Dr. Rodriguez is a rock star in this field. He specializes in robotic surgery.”

Rock star. Now I had a rock star doing my surgery. Did he play heavy metal while he snipped out my female organs? Did he don leather pants and vest under his scrubs and wear his hair in a ponytail?

Thank goodness I didn’t need those ovaries anymore. “I want them out as soon as possible. The ovaries, I mean. I don’t need them anymore. Why not take them out right away?”

“Because then you have to recover from the surgery before we can start chemotherapy. And in the meantime, the cancer outside the ovaries continues to progress.”

So logical. “Sorry, I’m having trouble applying reason to this situation.”

“You’ll get there.”

Would I?

Her words penetrated my dizzying kaleidoscope of disconnected thoughts. *Chances of survival*. My mouth was so dry I couldn’t swallow. I tried to drink from my travel mug. It was empty. My lips were chapped. I dug through my purse, searching for my ChapStick. My three kids and my grandkids lived in Chicago, Fayetteville, and Germany. I rarely saw them in person. Would they remember me when I was gone?

Kris was talking again. “Right now, I want you to go home, pack a bag, and come to San Antonio. You can stay with me while we work out the details.”

That sounded so good. To rely on my sister, just for a few days, just until I got the hang of this bizarre new reality. But it wouldn’t work.

I was the big sister. I did the heavy lifting. “I can’t. I have work. I’ve missed so much work already.”

“My recommendation is that you ask for a leave of absence. Starting tomorrow.”

“But my students—”

“Twenty-two five-year-olds in one room is a petri dish recipe for colds, flu, ear infections, COVID, and viral infections. You name it, they get it. Chemotherapy will wreak havoc on your immune system. The school can get a long-term sub. You need to focus on your treatment.”

“I love my job. It keeps me sane.” Not many people could say that. Instilling a love of learning and reading in a bunch of kids who were like sponges absorbing everything I taught them, who could ask for a better job? Kids soaked up everything—good and bad—I wanted to be the one who filled them up with so much good, the bad couldn’t squeeze in between the cracks. “The kids love me and I love them. I need to work.”

Not sit around thinking about this unfathomable new reality. Besides, I needed the money. *I’m not a physician married to an architect with his own successful firm.* I blinked. Did I say that aloud? No, thank goodness. I only thought it.

“Don’t worry about the money.” That didn’t mean Kris couldn’t read my mind. She was good at it. “I’m sure you have short-term disability insurance with the school district. You’ll need to submit the paperwork for FMLA. That way they’ll have to hold your position for you.”

FMLA. Family and Medical Leave Act. I tried to keep up. I was still back at short-term disability insurance. I vaguely remembered paperwork during the open enrollment period for insurance. Where were my copies?

“But not today.” Kris was still talking. “Go home. Eat something. Get some caffeine in your system. Call your principal. Pack your bag.

Come to San Antonio. I'll be waiting for you. We'll make a game plan, and tomorrow we'll start on it."

"But your patients—"

"Shay will schedule them with my physician assistant until I know when your appointments are. If it's something she can't handle, my other colleagues will pick up the slack. See you in a couple of hours."

"Cleo. What about Cleo?"

"Cleopatra can come too."

Cleopatra, the queen of cats, queen of my house, and queen of my heart, would not be happy. She didn't like any change in our routine. "You have dogs."

"They'll love the company. I promise. Just come, honey."

*Honey.* That was my endearment for her. She didn't play fair. I took care of her while Mom and Dad had worked—and then when Mom worked—when Kris had mono in fourth grade, a broken arm in sixth grade, appendicitis her freshman year, a broken heart her sophomore year, and her wisdom teeth out as a senior. And a hundred other moments in time when she needed her big sister—really she needed her mother, but that option was off the table. That left me. Now I had her.

"Sissy?"

"Yeah?"

"It won't be like Mom. It's not like that anymore."

She was my sister. She was the only one who knew what was going through my mind. Because it was going through hers too. "Promise?"

"Promise. See you soon."

"See you soon."

KRISTEN

*Don't make promises you can't keep.* A cardinal rule in the practice of oncology and I'd broken it with my own sister. One of the many reasons a medical professional shouldn't treat a family member. After our call, I'd managed to retrieve my focus and treat my remaining patients for the day without further interruption. To Shay's surprise, I almost finished on time—a rare treat for my staff.

I answered one last email, perused my schedule for the next several days, logged off my computer, grabbed my bag, and took a last look around my office. How I would balance my responsibilities here while guiding Sherri through her treatment escaped me at this moment. Guilt settled in my stomach like toxic sludge. My patients counted on me. Some had been seeing me for years.

I'd figure it out. Just like I'd figured out how to divvy up my time among my daughters, my husband, and my practice. I always did, never losing sight of the fact that I had to do better for my patients than my mom's oncologist had done for her.

I could almost hear Daniel's response to that sentiment. *Ha. Ha. Ha.* With an exaggerated sigh and an eye roll equal to any our two daughters could muster. He didn't understand what drove me. Mostly

because I had never articulated it to him. This time he didn't need me to spell it out. This was Sherri. He'd understand.

My conversation with Sherri's oncologist had been short and less than sweet. She took umbrage to the idea that we could do a better job treating her patient in San Antonio than she could in Kerrville. In theory I agreed. Just not when the patient was my sister. I tried to smooth her ruffled feathers by explaining that I wanted to be Sherri's support system, and to do that she needed to be here. Because of my practice. I tossed in words like *professional courtesy* and *patient's quality of life* and *twenty-plus years of experience*.

She unbent enough to agree after a few minutes that a support system was paramount in a situation such as Sherri's. Especially since she was divorced and lived alone. Her oncologist would make the referral.

I barely had the words *thank you* out of my mouth when she hung up. It had been a tough day for everyone, it seemed.

Next step was to talk to Shay and my physician assistant, Tasha. They were huddled behind the counter in my medical assistant's work space, poring over a fax.

"Just the two people I need to see."

Grinning, Tasha nudged Shay. Both women saluted. They liked to tease me. "Hey, Dr. T., you did an amazing job of keeping up today."

"Thanks. I need your help." I sketched out the situation. "I'm sorry to unload on you with so little warning. As soon as I know my sister's schedule, we'll huddle and make a plan for what I need to handle and what patients you can cover, Tasha. Shay, I need you to send patients messages through the portal, giving them a heads-up. Offer to reschedule anyone who objects. New patients should be referred to Dr. Jensen or Dr. Shumaker. I don't want to postpone their initial consults."

I answered a few more questions and headed for my car, already thinking about what came next. When was the last time the bedding in the guest bedroom had been washed? My brain refused to cough

up that information. Had Daniel been to the grocery store recently? I hadn't. My husband did most of the cooking, so I left it to him.

At a minimum the bedroom probably needed tidying. The cleaning lady generally skipped that room unless we were actually having company. Cleo's litter box would go in the adjoining bathroom. My Nissan Leaf EV must've driven on autopilot the twenty-plus minutes it took to pull into our far northwest-side subdivision.

I pulled into the driveway and sat there, staring at the two-story classic Hill County-style house with its white limestone-and-timber exterior, metal roof, and solar panels. It nestled perfectly in the expansive one-and-a-half acre yard filled with crepe myrtle, Mexican plum trees, and live oaks. I loved the esperanza, pride of Barbados, salvias, lantanas, mint marigolds, and coral honeysuckle Daniel and I had planted. The native plants reduced the need for watering and fed the hummingbirds and butterflies.

I loved this house with its high ceilings, stacked-stone fireplace, exposed wooden beams, and dark hardwood floors. It was Daniel down to the joists. He'd designed it to be full of light and energy efficient. I trusted him like no other architect. Not because he was my husband, but because he had exquisite taste, a strong sense of place, and the talent to go with it.

I loved it like I loved my husband.

It was a perfect place for Sherri to go through treatment. Not like the drab, airless, cramped apartment where we'd grown up. Mom did her best, and we never complained. We kept the place clean and neat and put supper on the table every night when she came home from work selling clothes to well-to-do women at Dillard's, tired to the bone—until she couldn't be on her feet for eight-hour stretches anymore.

Stooping like an old lady, I dragged my carcass up the winding sidewalk to the porch. Raucous barking greeted my pending arrival. I shoved open the door to meet Dash and Scout, my welcoming

committee of two Australian Shepherds waiting to herd me into the kitchen so I could fill their bowls. I shed my slip-on Crocs and dumped my purse and keys on the table in the foyer. Dash nudged my hand while his brother headbutted my knees. At sixty pounds apiece, they could easily knock me over. I knelt and gathered them in my arms. Their blue eyes were filled with the unconditional love I wish I could bottle and prescribe for my patients. Scout stood a little taller, but they both had coats that mottled black, gray, and white patchwork known as merle. “Long time no see, you dweebs.”

“You came home early!”

Startled, I glanced up from scratching behind Scout’s ears. A glass of water in one hand, my husband stood in the middle of the great room he’d designed. He rarely came home before six o’clock. “So did you.”

He smiled. That knock-your-socks-off smile that never failed to make my heart do a two-step that would worry my cardiologist friend. Even after twenty-four years of marriage, Daniel still had that effect on me. He toasted me with his water. “I told you I was taking the afternoon off. Dad called. They want us kids there early so we can take family pictures before the guests arrive. Did I tell you they hired a live band? Bluegrass. Her favorite.”

His mother’s seventy-fifth birthday celebration. I’d forgotten.

His voice trailed away. His smile faded. “You forgot, didn’t you?”

“I didn’t—”

“Don’t deny it. I can read your face like an open book, you know that.” Daniel took a long swallow of water, then set the glass on the coffee table in slow, deliberate movements. “I guess it doesn’t matter if you forgot. You’re here. You have plenty of time for a shower before you get dressed. It’s casual.”

He clipped the words the way he did when he was trying not to show his anger. He eased onto the couch. He was as trim and fit as he had been when I married him at twenty-three. His dark, almost-black



curls were as thick as ever, even with the occasional strand of silver. He'd already changed into tan Dockers and a white, long-sleeved dress shirt. His huge ochre eyes were his best feature. Right now they were somber. Disappointed. "What's going on? Why are you home early? It's obviously not for Mom's party."

I straightened. Scout whimpered. He was more tuned in to the temperature in the room than his brother. "It's okay, sweet pea." I padded barefoot into the great room and sat on the settee across from Daniel. The dogs settled at my feet, panting as if they'd hiked Death Valley to get there. "I got some bad news."

"I understand how bad you feel when you realize a treatment isn't working and a patient's only option is hospice." That he managed to keep his voice level spoke well of Daniel's character. He'd taken a back seat to my patients for most of our marriage. He didn't always like it, but he acquiesced to it. "Come to the party. You love ribs. Eat ice cream and cake. They're having carrot cake and German chocolate—your favorite." He approached, knelt at my feet, and took my hands in his. "Talk to people about something besides disease and death."

It did sound nice. But no amount of discussions involving politics, wars, weather, or whose child received a full ride to what university next fall would drown out the droning of the digital recordings used by medical records transcribers. Nothing could stifle my brain's endless efforts to devise a new treatment regimen that might be the one to make the difference for this patient or that one. "It's not—"

"We could dance a slow dance. Remember how we used to dance to Coltrane in our old apartment when you were doing your residency?" His disappointment had been replaced with a tender tone that begged me to join him in this jaunt down memory lane. Today's reality kept intruding.

Daniel laughed softly. "The living room was so small we kept bumping into furniture."

I did remember. The feel of his hands on my lower back, holding

me close to his warm, solid body. His smell of Polo, oregano, and basil. The roughness of his five o'clock shadow when he nuzzled his chin against my cheek. The sound of his laugh when I stepped on his bare foot. I was—and still am—a terrible dancer. “You still make the best spaghetti sauce—better than your mother’s.”

“I won’t tell her you said that.” He rubbed his thumb over my palm. “Come.”

“It’s not a patient. It’s—”

The doorbell rang. Dash and Scout barked—in case we weren’t aware that friend or foe approached. They raced to the foyer and back. “Hush, hush, you two. That’s enough.” Daniel let go of my hand and straightened. I beat him to the door. I put my hand on the doorknob and swiveled for a second. “It’s Sherri.”

“What’s Sherri doing here in the middle of the week? That’s why you can’t go to Mom and Dad’s? I don’t get it. What’s going on?” He grabbed Scout’s collar and pulled him back. The dog was still enough of a puppy that he wanted to jump on our guests. “She can come. Mom and Dad love your sister. No RSVP required. They’ll have enough food to feed Canada.”

“She won’t be up to socializing. I tried to tell you.” I shooed Dash back from the door. His MO was to sniff, bark, wag his tail, and then jump. At least the guest had a chance to brace herself. “I have to let her in.”

“Yes, of course.”

I opened the door. Sherri stood on the porch, a suitcase in one hand, the long strap of her purse over her shoulder, her bulging canvas book bag hanging from her other shoulder, and a bag of cat food under her arm. She clutched Cleo’s pet carrier in her other hand. Her face was red and damp with perspiration. “I know it’s a lot of stuff, but I’m not moving in, I promise. There’s a bag of cat litter in the car.”

“No worries. Let me help you.” Daniel relieved her of the pet carrier, from which yowls and hisses announced Cleo’s unhappiness

with her current circumstances. Daniel also took the bag of food. “It’s good to see you, Sher. It’s been months. I was so busy yapping, Kristen couldn’t get a word in edgewise to tell me you were coming.”

“It was . . . last minute.” Sherri set her suitcase aside. “It’s good to see you too. Thanks for letting me stay a day or two.”

A day or two? Wishful thinking.

Daniel did what he did best. He set aside her burdens—out of the dog’s reach—and gave my sister a hearty hug. “I’ll get the cat litter in a minute. You’re always welcome here. Come in, come in. We were just talking about my mom’s seventy-fifth birthday blowout. It’ll be epic. You should come.”

Sherri took a step back. Her cobalt-blue eyes were wet, but no tears fell. “That’s sweet of you to invite me, and I’d love to see your family, but I’m . . . I haven’t . . . I don’t feel very well.”

Daniel’s gaze bounced from Sherri to me and back. “I’m sorry to hear that. Come in, come in. Sit down.”

“I have to get Cleo situated. She had one hissy fit after another the entire way here. Not even Kenny G made her happy.”

Usually smooth jazz calmed the persnickety feline. The dogs weren’t helping either. Scout had his nose thrust against the carrier’s mesh. I dragged him away. “I’ll take her to your bedroom—”

“Let me do it. I’ll run get the litter first.” Daniel dashed out the door and was back in less than ninety seconds. Murmuring sweet nothings, he carted Cleo down the hallway that led to the guest bedroom.

I turned to Sherri. “How did the conversation with your principal go?”

“She told me to take all the time I need.” Sherri kicked off her flip-flops. Her pale-green BLOOM WHERE YOU’RE PLANTED T-shirt hung loose on her angular body. So did her white slacks. “She said she would ask the district’s HR folks to email me the paperwork to fill out, not to worry about a thing.”

Kerrville wasn’t a big town, but big enough that the school district

and Sherri's principal would have plenty of experience in dealing with leave issues. No matter how guilty Sherri felt about it—and guilt was written all over her face. “Good. I’m glad you were able to start the process so quickly.”

It would take time to complete. The FMLA red tape was massive.

Sherri pulled a tie from her ponytail and let her blonde hair—now streaked with big swathes of silver like the highlights most women paid their hairdressers for—fall to her shoulders. “I suppose. I’m going to miss my munchkins. I plan to go back to teaching the second I’m able.”

“Of course you do.”

I understood. My eyelid twitched every time I thought about the patients getting the word tomorrow that I wouldn't be sitting with them in the exam room, walking them through next steps, advising them, and treating their side effects. “You can reassess in the fall, depending on how you do with chemotherapy.”

She would learn no one is indispensable. Daniel's voice reverberated in my head. He said that every time we argued about why I couldn't take time off for a weekend trip to the beach or even a movie. Those arguments had become more frequent after the girls left for college. He wasn't handling our empty nest well.

“You didn't tell Daniel I was coming?”

Sherri obviously intended to move on. So I followed. “He didn't give me a chance. He's totally wound up about his mother's birthday. Not that I blame him.” I linked arms with her. I might be four years younger, but we'd been the same five-foot-eight-inches tall since my last growth spurt in eighth grade. We trudged into the great room where we settled side by side on the most comfortable couch in the universe. “With her heart attack and quadruple bypass last year, they weren't sure she'd be around for this birthday.”

Not to mention the breast cancer diagnosis five years earlier. She'd been diagnosed stage 1. A lumpectomy and radiation had successfully

treated it with no recurrence. Everyone had breathed a sigh of relief when she hit that critical five-year mark. Chances of a recurrence were small—not zero—but small.

“And they’re having a big celebration. You should go. Don’t miss it because of me. I don’t want Angela giving you demerits because of me.”

“Angela gave up on me years ago.” Daniel’s mother loved her five progeny fiercely and expected their wives to put them first, as she had done throughout her life. “I doubt she’ll even notice with a hundred of her closest friends invited to the soiree.”

“Can you call a Texas barbecue a soiree?” Sherri tucked her hands under her armpits and leaned her head against the couch. “I bet Daniel’s dad will wear a white cowboy hat and ostrich-skin cowboy boots.”

Daniel’s parents were the king and queen of country with a massive ranch south of San Antonio. Four of their boys grew up in 4-H, Future Farmers of America, rodeos, and country music concerts. Only Leonard Tremaine could be disappointed in a son who chose architecture at University of Texas-Austin as his college major instead of agricultural business at Texas A&M in College Station. “I’m sure you’re right. They’ll probably barbecue an entire cow.”

“But there will be homemade ice cream and two kinds of cake.”

Sherri had been to enough Tremaine family events to know they never failed to send their guests home stuffed to the gills and teetering on a food coma. “There’s that. I happen to have the makings for ice cream sundaes and banana splits in my kitchen for just such an occasion as this. Besides, Angela will understand when she hears about the cancer.”

“The cancer? What cancer?” Daniel strode into the room. “Who has cancer? Which one of you?”

The fear that etched lines in his face was so familiar. No one was

immune to it, least of all a man married to someone who spent every day trying to rescue people from the disease's clutches.

"It's me. I have cancer," Sherri said in a rush to end his panic. "Ovarian cancer."

Daniel didn't curse much. He did so now as he eased onto the settee. "I'm so sorry. No wonder you're here." Scout, finely tuned to Daniel's every emotion, propped his head on his knee. Daniel scratched behind the dog's ears. "This is exactly where you need to be. I'm sure Kristen has made it clear, but I second it. Stay here as long as you like. We're here for you. I'm here for you."

Sherri clenched my hand so hard my fingers hurt. "Thank you. I appreciate that so much. We'll see. I want to get back to teaching as quickly as possible."

"I set up Cleo's litter box in the guest bathroom and put out her food and water. Then I released her from the carrier." Scout sneaked up on the settee next to Daniel. He slid an arm around the dog's shoulders and pulled him close. It wasn't clear who comforted whom. "She wandered around for a bit, yowling and complaining, but then she lapped up some water and took a seat on the windowsill."

Daniel's love language was doing things for people. It took me a while to figure that out. I wanted him to tell me he loved me with words. He preferred deeds. In this instance it also took the pressure off Sherri to talk with him about her situation.

"Thanks." She heaved a sigh. "Thanks for doing that."

"No problem." He ran his hand down Scout's back, planted a kiss on the dog's nose, and stood. "I better get going and let you get settled in. My dad's probably paying the photographer big bucks for the family photos."

"Tell your mom I send my regrets." I stood and followed him out to the kitchen and the door to the garage where he'd parked his F-150 EV. He turned and paused, his dark eyes full of pain. "I'm really, truly

sorry about this. I would stay, but I figure Sherri needs some time to decompress. So do you. You don't need me around, getting in the way."

His arms came up as if he would hug me, then dropped. "Unless you want me to stay. You know I will."

"No, no, go." When was the last time we hugged? I couldn't remember. Now wasn't the time to pull that thread in our unraveling relationship. What I wanted to say was never take for granted there would be another birthday to celebrate. Savor those moments now. "This is your mom's day. Don't disappoint her. We'll be fine."

He kissed my forehead and stared at me for a long moment. The pain faded into resignation. "See you . . . tomorrow . . . or sometime . . ."

"Tonight when you get home." It would be late. "Wake me up and tell me all about it."

When was the last time we'd done anything together, just Daniel and I?

Probably the last time we hugged. A parade of memories marched by. His invitation to go to a movie, to go to a comedy club downtown, a Spurs game, to a Christmas tree lighting, a play at the Majestic, a concert at the AT&T Center. Invitations abounded. Memories of togetherness not so much.

Bitterness tinged his smile. "I'll probably be back late."

"Tomorrow then, for dinner."

But he was gone.

Relief swept over me. Followed closely by guilt. He was my husband. Did I take him for granted? Did I shortchange him in my balancing act? No. No. I tried to dredge up righteous anger. How dare he try to guilt trip me in the middle of my sister's crisis? He was being selfish.

Daniel was the least selfish person I'd ever known.

Like Scarlett O'Hara, I'd think about it later. Tomorrow.

I found a tray and loaded it up with all the fixings for an ice cream extravaganza. In South Texas, ice cream was a year-round treat. Sherri

would have her choice of a sundae, a root beer float, or a banana split. Or all three. Chemotherapy would come later. Tonight the patient needed ice cream therapy.

I deposited the tray on the coffee table and bowed like a butler. “Ice cream eaten on your diagnosis day has no calories.” With a flourish I listed ingredients that included chocolate, caramel, or strawberry syrup, bananas, whipped cream, chopped nuts, candied cherries, root beer, and three flavors of ice cream. “I’m happy to do the honors, or, if you prefer, you may serve yourself, which allows you to double up on your choice of ingredients.”

Sherri struck the thinker pose. “Decisions, decisions, decisions.” Then, with quick, efficient movements born of much practice, she assembled a banana split, heavy on the whipped cream. She leaned back, took a bite, and mimed a swoon. “A masterpiece, if I do say so myself.”

“You’re so predictable.” I went with my usual. A sundae, heavy on the chocolate syrup. “Chocolate is better.”

“You’re the predictable one.” She took another bite and savored it for a few seconds. “At least mine has bananas. Potassium and fiber.”

“Hey, mine has cherries. They’re full of antioxidants. Besides, ice cream is made from milk. Therefore it’s full of calcium. So it’s healthy, right?”

“Mmm, no. Wishful thinking and maraschino cherries don’t count.” Her smile faded. “Is it just me or is it ironic that I’ve spent so much time working out, eating healthy, and avoiding alcohol, only to end up with cancer anyway?”

I concentrated on the creamy chocolate delight on my tongue for a few seconds, searching for an answer. “You can do all the right things and get cancer. That’s a fact. The fact that you’re in good health, not overweight, and you exercise gives you a leg up in withstanding the treatment and its side effects. This little pity party tonight is the



exception, not the rule. Don't stop exercising—unless your body tells you to rest, then rest.”

“Good to know.”

“Sorry, I didn't mean to lapse into doctor mode. Tonight I'm in sister mode.”

“I appreciate both more than you can possibly imagine. Especially when sister mode means all the ice cream I can eat.”

She licked her lips and sighed dramatically. “Now all we need is a rom-com flick.”

“That can be arranged.” I picked up the TV remote but didn't push the power button. “Before I slide completely into sister mode, do you want to know about the call I had with your oncologist?”

Sherri whipped her spoon in the air like a fencer with a sword. “Cancer talk is off the table for the rest of the evening. Tomorrow we face reality. Tonight we eat junk food and entertain ourselves with unrealistic but extremely satisfying romances.”

Sounded like the perfect plan. “*You've Got Mail*, *Sleepless in Seattle*, *Sweet Home Alabama*, *Ghost*, *The Wedding Planner*, or *Twister*? Or the usual?”

The usual was Kevin Costner's baseball trilogy: *Field of Dreams*, *For Love of the Game*, and *Bull Durham*. They had the advantage of being about baseball and featuring our favorite actor.

“You've got *Ghost*? I'm in awe.” Chewing her lower lip, Sherri shook her head. “Let's start with *Ghost*, but we have to watch *Sweet Home Alabama* after that. We save Kevin for when we're really in the dumps.”

It didn't matter which one we watched. We knew their dialogues by heart.

“Why would you wanna marry me, anyhow?” We recited together. “So I can kiss you anytime I want.”

Laughing, I stood and rearranged pillows and grabbed an afghan from the back of the sofa. Sherri snuggled under it with me. I pressed

the power button and navigated my way to the DVR to the folder where I kept all the movies Daniel never wanted to watch with me. I leaned my head on Sherri's shoulder. She patted my knee. "Just so you know, I'm so glad you're my sister," she whispered.

"Ditto," I whispered in my best Patrick Swayze imitation. "Now shut up, Patrick's talking."

We both knew Patrick died of cancer. So maybe it wasn't the best choice of movies. Halfway through the scene where Demi Moore was watching the penny slide up and down the door like magic while Patrick Swayze and Whoopi Goldberg waited on the other side, Sherri grabbed the remote and paused the movie. "Just so you know, I bought a cremation plan."

"Which you won't need for years, Ms. Marathon Runner." I tugged the remote from her hand and pressed Play. "Watch the movie."

She tugged the remote back and put the movie on pause. "You need to know this. Chance and I have living wills. He has medical power of attorney—"

"You gave your ex-husband medical power of attorney? Are you nuts?"

"Hush. I have a DNR. I didn't want you to have to make the decision to unhook me."

"Which isn't going to happen." I understood the need to feel in control. I knew when to recommend to patients to get their affairs in order. But not my sister. Not yet. Surely not yet. "Let's not assume the worst. New treatments are getting approved every day."

"I'm not assuming the worst, but I am being realistic—at least about that part."

"What do you mean, that part?"

She grinned. "I want my ashes tossed from Machu Picchu. You know, in the Andes Mountains in Peru."

"Seriously?" I groaned. "Fine. But if I go first, I want mine spread from the Egyptian pyramids. You have to climb every step."

KELLY IRVIN

“I’m obviously going first. I’m the older sister. I have cancer.”

“I smoke.”

“So you admit it—”

I turned the movie up. Demi Moore was such a good crier. I wanted to cry with her. Instead, I ate more ice cream.



THOMAS NELSON  
*Since 1798*

## DANIEL

Mom accepted my hug and birthday wishes with her usual elegant aplomb. Her scent of roses, lilies, and sandalwood always reminded me of car rides to church and then to Grandpa and Grandma's house for Sunday dinners. White Diamonds. Classy, like her. She made a production of peering left, right, then over my shoulder. "No Kristen?"

"I'm sorry, Mom. She sends her regrets." I'd spent the better part of the thirty-minute drive to my parents' house debating how much to say. I didn't want to throw a damper on the party with Sherri's cancer diagnosis. Nor did I want Mom to think less of Kristen than she already did. "A pressing emergency came up."

"As per usual." Her expressive shrugs used to amaze me as a kid. How a woman could say so much with a simple lift of her shoulders boggled the mind. Get a C in math? A shrug conveyed disappointment, disapproval, disbelief, and anger in one fell swoop. Fender bender in the family car? Fear, concern, relief, and disapproval in one rise and fall. "There's always next year." Which was her way of saying she might not be around another year. Never mind that at the moment she looked as if she might live forever—certainly longer than I would. She'd weathered her share of health crises, but tonight she glowed with

health in a shimmering red dress and silky black jacket. Hair in an attractive silver bob. Classy sapphire pendant earrings.

I took her arm and matched my stride to hers toward the gathering of the Tremaine clan in front of a stand of heritage oaks. “She got some bad news today. I’ll tell you about it later. Tonight’s your night.”

Yes, it was a base appeal to her desire to be the center of her son’s attention, and I played it to the hilt. Her billion-dollar smile widened as her sons, daughters-in-law, and a multitude of grandchildren—although not my daughters—took turns embracing her and then me. Without fail, each one asked for Kristen. Without fail, I made vague references to a pressing emergency. Without fail, they nodded knowingly. They were used to it. As was I.

Finally, the agony of posing three-dozen adults and children for a portrait came to an end after much pulling of hair and gnashing of teeth. My dad threw his arm around my shoulders and walked me toward the massive pavilion where catering employees put the final touches on an array of food that would feed most of Texas. My brothers and their wives assumed their posts, greeting guests just beginning to stream through the fence gates.

Dad wore his usual attire of pressed, creased blue jeans, a long-sleeved Western-style shirt, sports coat, Tony Lama cowboy boots, and a white Stetson cowboy hat that didn’t quite cover his mass of snowy-white hair. “Your mom tells me Kristen won’t be with us tonight.”

“That’s right. She has—”

“A pressing emergency, I know.” He paused long enough to straighten a slightly cockeyed pile of napkins next to a stack of earthenware plates—no Styrofoam for this shindig. “Is everything all right between you two? I don’t remember the last time I saw you both together. Or Maddie and Brielle.”

How quickly they forgot. “The girls were with us when we came over for Christmas Day brunch.”

Over a month ago. Not so long.

“And Kristen barely spoke. She spent the entire time on her phone.” His tone matched the disdain on his weather-beaten face. Mom might look fifty, but years of working in the sun on the ranch had given Dad the deep wrinkles of a man midway through his seventies. “She’s worse than the grandkids.”

Not fair. One of her patients ended up in the hospital on Christmas Eve. He died on Christmas Day. Neither of us shared that news in the interest of not casting a pall over the festivities.

Dad snagged a tortilla chip and dunked it in a steaming vat of chili con queso. “Your mother’s going to faint when she sees her birthday gift.”

I froze. Birthday gift. In the midst of Sherri’s chaotic arrival, I’d left the simple silver-and-turquoise James Avery bracelet I’d picked out for Mom on the kitchen island. “You never said what you got her.”

“A European cruise with stops in Austria, Germany, and Sweden.”

Mom loved cruises. Dad would prefer a trip to Canada to hunt elk. “She’ll love it.”

“It’s not my thing, but it’s hers. That’s what counts. Romance is never dead, no matter the age or the number of years married, Son. You should try it. Maybe Kristen would pay more attention to you if you swept her off her feet with a big romantic gesture.”

Romantic advice from my father. I veered toward the bar. “I need something to drink. Do you want anything?”

“I better circulate and greet our guests.” He slapped me on the back. “We’ll talk later.”

I sank onto a barstool. The bartender laid a napkin on the bar in front of me. “What’ll it be?”

I ordered a Diet Pepsi and contemplated a basket of Texas-shaped tortilla chips surrounded by small bowls of green salsa, red salsa, pico de gallo, and queso. The scents of chopped cilantro, onion, garlic, and lime were as familiar to me as Mom’s perfume. Dad married a stay-at-home mom in an era in which she would’ve been called a housewife.

And she liked it. He knew nothing about being married to a professional, career-track woman.

I wasn't a quitter. Twenty-four years married to Kristen proved that. Sherri's diagnosis broke my heart. But it was only the latest in a never-ending series of crises that kept Kristen from focusing on our marriage. She was so oblivious she didn't even realize our relationship was broken. It took two people to make a marriage work. I'd been alone in this relationship for years.

When was the last time we'd gone anywhere together? I searched the far corners of my memory until I stumbled onto it. We'd gone to Brielle's high school graduation, out to a family dinner, and then had a drink at our favorite piano bar while Brielle went out to celebrate with friends. Almost two years ago.

I dipped a chip in the pico and savored the crunchy chip, the salt, and the fiery bite of serrano pepper. It seemed wrong to enjoy anything when a person I knew and loved had received a cancer diagnosis only hours earlier. I gulped down soda, trying to wash the bitter taste of reality from my mouth. Kristen's worst fear had come true. It sucked. Absolutely sucked. For Sherri. For her kids and grandkids. For the children she taught. For Kristen.

And yes, for me, if I was allowed to say that.

A few notes from an Ed Sheeran song emanated from my phone. The air around me lightened. "Hey, Maddie, did you decide to live at home and finish college at UTSA?"

My oldest daughter laughed—she sounded just like her mother. *Chuckle, chuckle, snort, chuckle.* "And you call me the eternal optimist."

"So what do you want?"

The going gag was that she never called unless she wanted something, which couldn't be further from the truth. She called me at least twice a week, sometimes more. "I sent Mom a text this morning about help with my rent. She didn't answer." The laughter had faded from Maddie's voice, replaced by concern mixed with hurt. "I know she

doesn't have time to call me like she used to, but she usually answers my texts—eventually. Is something wrong?"

Maddie was empathetic and discerning. She would make a great psychologist one day. I stirred the ice in my glass and contemplated whether it was my place to tell her Aunt Sherri's news. "Your mom's been up to her ears this week, especially today."

"When isn't she? She used to make it work. We used to talk on the phone all the time. Now I don't even rate a text?"

"I'll transfer the money to your account."

"That's not the point and you know it. Mom used to make all our games and recitals and stuff. Now that we're not at home anymore, did we stop being her daughters? Brielle has noticed it too. What's going on? You're being weird."

I couldn't talk to her about the bigger picture. It would be a betrayal of her mother. I swallowed all my own feelings. They made a huge, twisted hunk of sharp, broken metal, dreams, and feelings in the pit of my stomach. "She had a bad day today, ladybug. Your Aunt Sherri got some bad news."

"Oh no. Tell me. Who knows when Mom will get around to it."

I spilled the news.

The intake of breath reverberated in my ear. It was the same sound I'd made when Sherri told me. "She'll be okay. Your mom will do everything in her power to make sure."

"She'll do her best." Maddie's voice held tears. A child who grew up with an oncologist for a mother knew what the facts were. Kristen never hid her defeats—or her victories—from the girls. Nor did she sugarcoat the facts. Maddie sniffed. "I'll come home."

"You have classes. Give it a few days and then call both of them. I know your mom will appreciate it, and so will Sherri."

"I should be there for Aunt Sherri. She's always been the best aunt ever."

"She's in good hands with your mom." I struggled for a way to



capture Sherri's immediate future without making my daughter feel worse—or hurt her feelings. “She’ll start chemo quickly and then she’ll have to be careful not to be exposed to any bugs. Her immune system likely will crash.”

“I didn’t think about that.” Maddie’s voice quivered. “If you would take care of the money thing, that would be great, Daddy. That way I won’t have to bother Mom about it.”

“I’m on it.”

“Thank you. Love you.”

“Love you more. Later on, you can come down for a weekend and stay with Grandma. She’d love it, and that way we can see each other.”

“Talk to you soon.”

Then she was gone.

It still boggled my mind how one minute my daughters were blowing bubbles and squealing on the back patio, and the next they were unpacking boxes in dorm rooms. I opened my banking app and took care of the money transfer.

“So, you said you were going to call it quits with Kristen if she stood you up one more time. Did you tell her it’s over?” Andrew, my second-oldest brother behind Leonard Jr., snagged the bar stool next to mine and crooked a finger toward the bartender. She nodded but continued preparing margaritas for the over-seventy crowd. “Obviously not. What happened?”

I scratched my forehead and cranked my head side to side. The words I’d spoken only a week ago over drinks at a sports bar watching a Spurs game finally came back to me. Sherri’s diagnosis had changed the course of action open to me—at least for now. “Unforeseen circumstances.”

“So much for drawing the line in the sand. ‘Put time and energy into our marriage or I walk.’ You even practiced that line ten or fifteen times.” Andrew pulled the basket of chips closer. “I knew you’d

chicken out. You've been putting up with her for so many years, you've forgotten how to stand up for yourself."

I didn't recall practicing. People used to say Andrew, with his dark hair and ochre eyes, and I could be twins. We looked so much alike growing up, but our personalities were completely different. Andrew was a big talker and prone to hyperbole. "You don't know what you're talking about."

"Sure I do. You've been unloading on me forever."

He was right. I needed to be able to talk to someone. The few times I'd tried with Kristen, she'd blown it off as me being in a bad mood. After all, who could blame an oncologist for putting patients first? She was trying to save their lives. I couldn't compete with that. I shouldn't want to compete with that. And I didn't.

"Andrew's right." William, my youngest brother, plopped onto the stool to my right. He had won the handsome sweepstakes, taking after Mom with her high cheekbones, dimples, and crystal-blue eyes. "You gotta stand up for yourself, dude. The martyr-for-a-cause thing doesn't suit you."

"Easy for you to say. You have a stay-at-home wife who homeschools your kids." William had married a chef who chose to give up her career to be a full-time mother to their three kids. I concentrated on loading a chip with guacamole. "That's an important job, but it lends itself to being available to you as needed."

"Seriously? You haven't seen Hope's erase board calendar. Baseball practice, dance lessons, art camp, swim meets, birthday parties, doctor's appointments, orthodontist appointments, driving lessons. She needs a chauffeur's license. Hope works full time. She just doesn't get paid for it."

True. Hope was blessed that her husband recognized this fact. Many husbands didn't. "When the girls were young, Kristen handled all those duties *and* worked full time."

"Supermom." We recited the words in unison. "Superhero."

“Talk about a martyr complex. Kristen loved showing off her Supermom skills.” William ordered a Bloody Mary and a shot of tequila. At my raised eyebrows he shrugged. “Hope is my designated driver tonight. I’m celebrating Mom’s birthday. She made it—in spectacular fashion, I might add.”

Andrew and I raised our glasses. “Here, here.”

“So we’re way off topic now.” Andrew drew circles in the condensation on his glass of iced water. “What happened to telling Kristen you’re considering filing for divorce?”

Hearing the words *filing for divorce* spoken aloud—even by someone else—made the hair on my arms stand up. I took another slug of soda. “I can’t. Not now. It wouldn’t be right.”

“Baww, baww, baww!”

“Sherri has cancer.”

No one spoke for several seconds. Banjo, steel guitar, and mandolin riffs in the midst of mic checks signaled the impending start of the band’s performance.

“That sucks.” Andrew spoke first. “Really sucks.”

“That’s the understatement of the century.”

“Did they catch it early?”

“That rarely happens. There’s no diagnostic tool for ovarian cancer.”

“At least she’s already had her kids.”

People always said stupid things when confronted with a cancer diagnosis. I’d learned that from Kristen. She said it was a reflex action. They didn’t know what to say so they said the first thing that came to their minds. Invariably something stupid. “I think she’d like to be around to see her grandkids grow up.”

“Sure, sure.”

We sipped our beverages in silence for a few moments.

“Hey, it’s the Tremaine boys. Three of them anyway.”

I swiveled at the sound of Matt Caine’s voice. Matt had been my

best friend since college. He was also my partner in our architectural firm. A woman I hadn't met accompanied him. She was a looker with onyx-black hair that hung loose on her shoulders. She leaned against the bar and offered us a confident smile. Her turquoise eyes matched the color of a form-fitting dress that showed off her physical attributes.

I nodded to acknowledge her presence before I turned to Matt. "Long time no see, partner."

We'd met earlier in the office conference room over a Grubhub-delivered lunch of Thai curry to discuss preliminary plans for a new building on the UTSA downtown campus.

"We can never see enough of each other, I'm sure." Matt shot me a lazy grin, softening the sarcasm. With his dark-brown hair and brown eyes, he could've been mistaken for the sixth Tremaine brother—except for his shorter stature. He definitely had the confidence. "I wanted to introduce you to a friend, Pilar Lozano." He waved in his guest's general direction. "Pilar just moved down here from Chicago. She's an architect in the market for a job. She specializes in green architecture. I've scheduled her for an interview early next week."

Our firm specialized in environmental architecture—the kind that required zero carbon buildings that would not negatively impact on the environment. Was this some kind of off-the-cuff job interview? We'd hired three new employees in the last month, and we still had more business than we could handle. A good architect grounded in our specialty would be welcomed. "Great. I'll look forward to it."

"Me too." She held out her hand. I hastily wiped mine, damp from my drink, on my pants and shook it. Her smile widened in amusement. "It's good to meet you. I'm excited about the opportunity to interview."

An awkward pause followed—likely only awkward for me. I'd never been good at chitchat. Especially with women I didn't know. Fortunately, my brothers welcomed the new guest and made desultory conversation for a few moments.

“I’m starving.” Andrew stood and pushed away from the bar. “Bring you a plate, bro?”

My appetite had fled when I learned of Sherri’s diagnosis. “I’ll grab something later.”

William followed his big brother into the growing mass of people lined up at the tables where waiters filled their plates from warming pans. “I could eat.” Matt took off after them. “You two get acquainted. If you have questions, Pilar, now is the time to ask them. Get a leg up on your interview. Daniel is no pushover. He likes to grill job applicants until they feel like blackened fish.”

“My partner likes to overstate things.” I studied my now-empty soda glass. “But I’m happy to answer any questions you might have.”

“That would be nice, really, but I don’t want to impose.” Pilar moved to the stool closest to me. “I’ve done a few job interviews in my time. I’ll figure it out.”

Work-related questions would be easier than social banter. Pilar had to fall into the thirty-five to forty age range, so she’d been in the workforce for a reasonable chunk of time. “I don’t mind. Tell me about yourself. Where are you currently employed?”

“You’re here to enjoy your mother’s seventy-fifth birthday, not conduct a job interview.” She waved at the bartender, who nodded and went back to the margarita he was mixing for one of Mom’s book club friends. “I’m perfectly happy to just chat the way one does at a party when you don’t know anyone.”

She was right, of course. I waited while she ordered a glass of Chardonnay, and the bartender refilled my glass with Diet Pepsi. “Matt said you were a friend, but you’re interviewing for a job. I’ve known him since college, but I don’t recall him mentioning your name. How do you know each other?”

“Actually, I’m his wife’s second cousin. I grew up in Chicago so we’re not that close. But when I realized I need a fresh start, she invited me to stay with them while I scouted opportunities. Matt treats me

like I'm his protégé." She rolled her eyes and chuckled. "I can handle myself professionally, but I do appreciate the social invites. Plus, they're both determined to cheer me up as my marriage had a nuclear meltdown."

That kind of fresh start. "I'm sorry about the nuclear meltdown. That must be hard."

Her eloquent shrug showed off muscular—yet elegant—bare shoulders. "Gorgeous weather for an outdoor party. February can be cold. Your parents lucked out."

Too personal, too quickly. Weather was a much better topic. "You never know in South Texas, but Dad was prepared to put up tents and have heaters, if need be."

"I understand you designed this house for your parents."

Another safe topic. "I did."

"It's beautiful. Clean lines. Fits seamlessly into the landscape." Pilar waved her hand with its long, delicate fingers toward the pool. "I haven't seen the inside, but I could live on this patio with the saltwater pool, hot tub, the full kitchen, and that view of the foothills."

"Thanks. This piece of land made it easy. Locally sourced materials are relatively easy to find here."

"Some architects would've tried to make the site fit the house."

"If my parents had wanted that, they would've found themselves another architect."

"How was it working with your parents?"

"It had its moments, but fortunately, my dad let my mom handle it. He gets what he wants at the ranch. And my mom is like me, a collaborator."

Or I was like her.

"I also saw the building you reimagined at The Pearl. Gorgeous."

We'd turned a stable into a music venue and bar without losing any of its historic features or charm. Or so said the owners. And I agreed. "One of my favorite projects."

“Did you always want to be an architect?”

After an astronaut phase followed by a brief flirtation with becoming an artist. “I think so, I just didn’t know what it was called. I liked to draw. I was interested in ecology, botany, and history. I was a nerd. My brothers played football and did FFA and 4-H. I had two left feet and no interest in ranching. They insisted I was adopted. I’ll give my dad credit. He tried to hide his disappointment, but I could see it.”

“I get that. My siblings are all in the medical profession, like my dad and mom.” A faint bitterness imbued her words. It matched her downturned lips. “My parents were actually disappointed I chose architecture.”

“I was lucky. Mine hid it well.”

“You’ve done well. You have your own firm.” The hard lines of her own disappointment in her parents disappeared. “No one argues with success.”

Mom and Dad hadn’t tried—much. Especially when we opened a second office in Austin, where we now had twenty-plus employees.

“For the most part. It took a lot of years to get here.” I’d done fifteen years with an excellent local firm. When Matt came to me with a proposal to join forces in a firm dedicated primarily to green architecture, I’d jumped at the chance. “San Antonio’s very different from Chicago. That’s quite a fresh start.”

Her smile fading, Pilar sipped her wine. Another awkward pause.

“I’m sorry about your marriage. It must be incredibly painful.”

“Thank you. We’ve been married seven years. Not that long when you think about it. We don’t have any kids, no joint property, not even a pet in common. Yet somehow, Chicago doesn’t seem big enough for the two of us. I couldn’t get far enough away.”

I could see that. How far would I have to go to leave behind the shadow Kristen cast over my life in San Antonio? To the edge of the earth.

“I’m sorry it’s not working out.”

“Thank you.” She ducked her head and studied fingernails painted a shiny pearl color. “He’s always working. He’s a security consultant. He says his work is really important. Like mine isn’t. His boss wants to know he can depend on him to make sure their clients’ buildings are safe, their proprietary property is safe, whatever. He loves his job . . . I’m glad he does. So many people hate their jobs. I love what I do too. Just not . . .”

“Just not more than you love him.”

“Exactly.”

“I’m sorry about that too.” Such lame words. I hardly knew Pilar, but her situation resonated. Too much. She only had seven years invested. I had twenty-four in my marriage, more in the relationship. Maybe she was right. Maybe getting out now would save her years of feelings of neglect, hurt, and bitterness that grew and grew until they overcame love and the willingness to overlook them in order to stay together.

“Don’t be so sad.” Pilar nudged me with her elbow. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have unloaded on you. I don’t know why I told you all that. Come on. This is a celebration. It’s your mother’s birthday. She’s here, she’s healthy, and she loves you.”

Pilar motioned for the bartender, who came over with the bottle of Chardonnay. “My friend here will have what I’m having.”

I shook my head. “I’m driving.”

“Fine, then I’m going in search of ice cream.” She stood. At six feet I’m fairly tall for a man. She matched my height. “This lady can fix you a root beer float. How does that sound?”

The bartender nodded. “Sure thing. Our motto is what the customer wants the customer gets—within reason.”

“More my style,” I conceded. “My girls always have root beer floats on their birthdays.”

Kristen preferred hot fudge sundaes, heavy on the hot fudge. Knowing her, she and Sherri were eating them right now.



Pilar tossed her hair over her shoulder, cocked her head, and squinted at me as if taking a second or third gander. “You sure you don’t want real food first?”

“Root beer floats *are* real food.”

She grinned. “I knew I liked you. I’m on it. I’ll be back with vanilla ice cream. I might even have some myself.”

I swiveled on the stool so I could watch her thread her way through dozens of tables decorated with bouquets of sunflowers. Matt sat with his wife, who was drinking a humongous margarita. He cocked his head, his expression a question mark. Did he really think I could take stock of a potential employee at my mother’s birthday party? So far, I liked what I’d heard, but I hadn’t seen a resume or checked references or talked architectural philosophy. I shrugged.

He nodded and went back to sipping on his wife’s drink when she wasn’t looking.

William and Andrew were seated at tables with their spouses and children. My other brothers, Leonard Jr. and Robert and their broods chowed down across the aisle. Mom and Dad had the places of honor at the head table. Their best friends took turns toasting them. The only people missing were my wife and kids. Loneliness grabbed me in a headlock.

Around me everyone talked and laughed. At least a hundred people, probably more, eating, drinking, and making merry. The sounds faded. The images blurred. A person could be alone just about anywhere.

*Get over it. This is Mom’s day. Be happy for her. It’s not about you.*

Pilar returned, loaded down with two bowls of homemade vanilla ice cream, which our bartender turned into floats in a matter of seconds.

We alternately slurped and spooned while she plied me for stories she could later use against Matt. Given we’d roomed together throughout our formative college years, I had plenty, and given his

decision to introduce me to Pilar, I was completely within my rights to share them.

“He really passed out in front of a bar on Sixth Street in the middle of the sidewalk with no pants on?”

“Yep. One of his finer moments. Or there was the time he tried to break into the dorm’s cafeteria because he had the munchies at two o’clock in the morning. Fortunately, a custodian caught him before he actually could’ve been charged with breaking and entering and theft.”

“My cousin knows about all these escapades and she still married him?”

“I think she figured if he survived all those crazy nights and near-death experiences, he must be good luck.” I savored sweet melted ice cream mixed with the fizz of root beer. Kids had it right. Sugar highs were the best. “Plus, he was never a total screwup. He partied hard, but he studied harder. Architecture school is no cakewalk. He graduated with honors.”

“And he had a good friend who had his back.”

“Maybe.”

“You’re fortunate to have made a friend you’ve kept all these years. So much so you’ve gone into business together.”

“No such friend for you?”

“My college roommate grew pot on the windowsill in our room. She majored in frat boys and beer pong. I had friends, but they got jobs in other cities. Or we grew apart. I guess that’s why it’ll be easy to leave Chicago.”

Loneliness reverberated in her voice. How could a gorgeous, smart, funny woman like her be lonely? Easy. I was a smart, well-educated, semi-funny guy. I didn’t claim to be good-looking, but I was passable. I was married yet I was still lonely. Maybe it was the world we lived in. Or maybe it was the choices we made.

I didn’t want to know which.

The music died away. A squawk announced a newcomer at the

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microphone. Pilar and I turned to face the portable stage. Andrew had the mic in his hand. The speechifying was about to begin.

At least I could offer her a friendly hand-up in the professional world—if she was indeed a qualified applicant. The firm was full of young, single architects who would welcome Pilar with open arms. She wouldn't lack for social opportunities or the chance to meet someone new. "I'm looking forward to interviewing you. I think you'd be a good fit."

She swiveled and looked me in the eye. "I'm so glad to hear that. Matt said the same thing. I'm coming by tomorrow to drop off my résumé and application."

I envied her, in a way. A fresh start sounded good. So good.



THOMAS NELSON  
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