

## Chapter 1

*“It’s no secret”*

“**A**re you sure, Dr. Napoli?”

“Yes, your levels are dangerously high, the tests show that the tumor has metastasized. It’s migrated from your colon to your stomach. Unfortunately, you have moved into Stage IV. I’m sorry, I wish I had better news.”

“This is the last thing I wanted to hear today.” Tears began to form and then fell.

“I know, but there is another approach we can take to slow down the rate of the tumor’s progression; chemotherapy treatments. It can often help shrink the cancer and relieve some

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symptoms and it could help you to live longer, unfortunately, at Stage IV, it's not a cure, but it could give you more time."

"But, if I start on chemo, my family will find out I have it. I told you, I didn't want them to know!"

"You can't continue to keep this a secret, Sandy; they're going to find out anyway and your family has a right to know. It's been three years since you were diagnosed. When were you planning on telling them?"

She allowed her tears to roll. "I don't know, I just can't bring myself to say *that* word; they'll be devastated."

"Haven't they noticed your lack of energy and weight loss? They must see that your appetite has changed and your mood; even I can see that, and I don't live with you."

"Yes, they've noticed, but they think it's because I've finally changed my eating habits. It's no secret that I've wanted to lose weight for years. As far as my mood goes, I don't show any sadness; it's been good therapy for me, pretending that everything is normal," she said.

"And your husband doesn't suspect anything?" Dr. Napoli said in disbelief.

"Well, he knows I'm not myself, I've been complaining of stomach aches, blamed that on Irritable Bowel Syndrome (IBS), I'm never in the *mood* for love, and I get tired easily."

“That tumor is robbing you of your energy in the same way you are robbing your family the chance to be with

you at this time when you need support. How would you feel if one of them were suffering and didn’t tell you?”

“I’m sure I would feel the way they will when they find out. I know it’s not right, but their lives are good now, I don’t want to cause any grief.”

“Sandy, I’m, concerned about your lack of nutrition too. I know you’re not eating like you should?”

“That’s true. I only eat when Dan or the family is around, I just don’t have an appetite,” she whined.

Dr. Napoli pulled her prescription pad from her pocket, “I’m going to prescribe something to stimulate your appetite and ease your symptoms.”

“What?”

“Marijuana pills.”

“No, I can’t, that’s a controlled substance, it’s against the scriptures and besides, I don’t want to be high and loopy!”

“You know you are my toughest patient. While others are doing everything in their power to work with me, you constantly work against me. The pills are actually made from the *oil* of the plant. They won’t make you high, the THC, what causes people to get high, has been removed. The oil, called cannabidiol

(CBD) won't do that. I have prescribed it for treating many common health issues, including anxiety and depression, which I am sure you are experiencing too, but mainly for the cancer. I like to think of it as a natural alternative for pain and symptom relief. The CBD oil may also help reduce chemotherapy-induced nausea and vomiting, which is common when you get the treatments." The doctor scribbled something on her pad and handed it to Sandy.

She frowned.

"Don't you realize I'm trying to ease your pain and prolong your life? And more than that, I want you to understand that you need your support system. Talking to them will relieve some of your anxiety, so please stop being so stubborn."

"Suppose I don't do chemo? How long do you think I could survive?"

"It's hard to say, but I'd say less than a year because its spreading."

"And with chemo, how long?"

"Possibly a year and a half *if it shrinks and the tumor doesn't* continue to metastasize," the doctor said. "The biggest threat right now is that it has spread into your stomach; the tumor is lodged against it, crowding the passageway for food to reach your stomach, which explains your lack of appetite, that's why

I need you to eat as much and as you can, in small bites because you need nutritious food.” the doctor said.

Sandy nodded. Wiped her nose with a handy piece of tissue from the box on the counter.

“I know you go to church, what does your pastor say about keeping this from your loved ones?”

“He doesn’t know either,” Sandy admitted.

“You are doing more harm than good because in addition to everything else, you are stressing yourself out by carrying this burden. Let me tell you something, the love and support that my patients get from their families goes a long way. Would you like me to tell them for you?”

“No!”

“Besides, if you decide on chemo, you will might need someone to drive you home. You won’t be in any shape to operate a motor vehicle; the process tends to wear you out, and when you get home, you may not be able to cook and do all your household duties either,” she warned. “They need to know.”

“I’ll think about it, this is exactly why I didn’t want the chemo,” Sandy protested.

The doctor ignored her refusal. “I’m going to set a chemotherapy appointment for next week, I want you to be there,” the doctor told her.

Sandy felt defeated. Did not win the argument with her doctor and was losing the fight with her body. She nodded and picked up her purse to leave, but before she left the examination room, Dr. Napoli did something out of the ordinary; gave Sandy a hug. Her first cancer hug; the symbolic gesture robbed her of her fake IBS cover and made her cancer real. The urgency of her doctor's request and the pity in her eyes was Sandy's warning that she would soon be dead.

Her heart pounded as she headed down the hospital corridor. The phony smile that she had mastered for years could not be conjured at a grinning nurse she passed in the hall. An old woman sat in a wheelchair who looked as if she was twice her age, it didn't seem fair. She hurried to the exit where she thought her fate could be put on hold.

Children were entering as she was exiting, she thought about her granddaughter, three-year old Kimi (*Japanese for secret*). She would miss Tiffany's child grow up, and Marie's children, David and Jai who were school aged now, and the kids Sharon would have. "My grandbabies will never understand why their Nana had to leave them."

She'd only had a few years with Marie since the discovery that she was her long-lost child, ripped from her arms at birth by Mr. Lord. Before she could get to her car, the tears were

streaming, her gait wobbly, she stumbled. Sandy fished for her keys from the Fendi bag Dan gave on her last birthday. With the door of her Suburban securely shut, the sobs were uncontrollable.

“Why, Lord? Why this horrible disease?” she cried. “I never smoked, I ate my vegetables and I exercised when I could; how did I get this? Why did I get this?” She found Kleenex in the glove box and buried her face in it.

“You know I have a loving family, God, I’m not only talking about my fears, and the pain I endure, but to put my family through this unconscionable illness is beyond my scope of understanding. Dan will lose his wife, my daughters will lose their mother, and my grandbabies will be distraught. And what about my friends, Audrey and Janet and my church family, this is just too much, Lord,” She cried. “Why did you choose me?”

Sandy sat in the parking garage for nearly an hour. After the crying session, she began praying again, but this time she invited the Holy Spirit to soothe her heart. This time she didn’t ask God why, she remembered not to question Him and tried to come to terms with it. She began to reflect on His promises. She knew that whatever He was up to would be for His glory and her good. She knew He would not put on her more than she could bear. All she had to do now was exercise her faith to believe that it was

true.

She began to think that maybe He needed her for a special assignment in heaven. Perhaps it was a test for her loved ones. It could have been that He wanted to know if she would still trust Him with this burden, love Him anyway through her affliction, so many thoughts ran through her head.

Sandy wondered what it would be like to meet the Lord. Would He be a bright glowing figure that she could not lay her eyes on, would He be a white man with long brown hair and a beard? Or perhaps he would be of her own likeness, a black man with hair like wool wearing a crown.

Knowing she would see her mother again gave her hope. She could ask what happened to her the day she took that ride to the store with Mrs. Lord and never came back, leaving her to fend for herself at only 18. She could tell her mother about her family, being a school teacher for 30 years, and all the adventures of her life. She could meet all her ancestors from the days of slavery, and Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Mahatma Ghandi, John the Baptist, Maya Angelou, Abraham Lincoln, and so many more historical figures that she had always admired.

She could finally ask God all those questions she had wondered about. Or maybe everything she always wanted to know would suddenly be revealed, or would she even care about

any of those things once she got to heaven?

Her imagination soared. The pearly gates would be opened as she walked on streets paved in gold, headed to her mansion in the sky that God had already prepared for her (John 14:2). These daydreams took some of the fright out of dying. It had to be the Holy Spirit calming her fears. It reminded her of Peter who when focused on Jesus and not the storm, was able to walk on water (Matthew 14:29). That is what she would do, turn her attention to her Lord, she would need him to break the news, she would need Him to comfort her family, she would need Him when the pain became excruciating and He would be there, because He was her father, and daddies are supposed to take care of their little girls.

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A week later, Sandy went for her first chemotherapy infusion; she was alone. It would be the scariest and bravest thing she had ever done. The nurse asked if someone was there with her because she might need a ride home.

“I was dropped off, but my family will be here to pick me up when I’m finished,” she lied. “Just a phone call away,” she said and raised her cell.

Sandy was ushered into a small office where she was asked a lot of questions and then filled out paperwork. Afterward, she

was told what to expect. The nurse said, “You will encounter new and possibly overwhelming experiences. Because you don't know how your body will react to the different medications, it is a good idea to have someone drive you to and from treatment although you may find that you tolerate it well and can come alone for future visits if you prefer.”

“Okay,” Sandy said. She felt like the children she taught on their first day of school in new surroundings and unsure of what to expect.

“The first thing we need to do is have your blood work drawn prior to your treatment. The results may influence your treatment, so there will be a delay after the blood is drawn while our team awaits the results. You will also need to wait for the pharmacist to mix the medication.”

“How long can I expect to be here?” she asked.

“Today, expect a few hours. From now on, a couple of hours. I would suggest you bring something to entertain yourself, like word puzzles, a book or headphones for your music. I would also suggest bringing a snack, just keep in mind that at this facility, there is more than one patient being treated in the room, so you want to be mindful to exclude any foods that have a strong odor to them. Some good snack ideas include nuts, whole grain crackers, hard cheese, hummus, granola bars and fruit. We will

provide water.”

After the intake and the blood test came back, Sandy was directed to a room with patients in their easy chairs hooked up to the chemicals. Most had lost their hair. Some of the women wore decorative scarves, it all made her nervous.

Sandy loved her naturally sandy hair and always received compliments on it. It was thick and manageable, bad hair days were never a problem for her and besides that, the color complimented her freckled face.

Afterward, she didn't think the chemo was so bad, but her chemo neighbors told her it wouldn't hit until she got home. They gave tips and pointers on what to do for every possible scenario because everyone was different. When it was time to go, Sandy grabbed some handy vomit bags the other patients said she would need and hurried out the door to get dinner on the stove by six. It was important to keep everything as normal as possible. When she got home, she hid her medication and vomit bags in her lingerie draw where she knew Dan would never look.

It was a new chapter for her, and she would need the Lord to get her through. She asked Him to forgive her for lying, and then she thought, *“I wouldn't have to lie if You had not allowed this disease in the first place!”* With a pang of guilt, she quickly took

her thought back and began seasoning the chicken wings they would have for dinner.

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