

## Chapter 9

*Bristol, UK, October 1993*

The doctor looked up from her notes. "I'm sorry."  
Fear swelled in Simon's throat. He took Kathy's hand.

"What does it mean?" Kathy whispered.

The doctor smiled. "In young children, diagnosed early, the prognosis is better than 80 percent."

"You mean, one in five dies." Simon's voice was thick.

"Well, that's true." The doctor shuffled in her seat. "But Ruby is only four. She's strong for her age."

Kathy shook her head. "She's been sick for months."

"Due to the disease. The form she has is the most common in children. We call it acute lymphoblastic leukemia." Simon picked up the rest of the conversation in sound bites. "*Chemotherapy . . . loss of hair . . . remission . . . lifelong . . .*" This couldn't be

happening. Not to them. Not to their only daughter. He wanted to run and hide, while Kathy was taking it all like a day at the office. The doctor stood, flashing a plastic smile. "Don't worry, we'll schedule her treatment as soon as we can. I am sure she will be fine."

They drove home. *Leukemia. Don't worry. Leukemia. Don't worry.* Simon swallowed. His mouth was dry. Our daughter has cancer, and we're told, don't worry. Simon tried to rationalize, but his mind wouldn't work. The car in front hesitated at the lights. Simon honked.

Kathy squinted out of the window. "We'll have to tell our parents," she said. "My mother will—"

Simon parked outside their dingy rental. Inside, the usual odor of damp wood greeted them. The babysitter smiled. Ruby ran to her parents. Her long hair bounced. *She can't possibly have cancer. The doctors must be wrong.*

Kathy knelt and wrapped her arms around the little girl and sobbed. Her tears dripped onto Ruby's neck.

"Mummy, why are you crying?"

"Ruby, darling—" Kathy's voice sounded strained. She reached for her daughter's hand. "You've been

unwell. Now you must to go to hospital where they'll make you better."

The girl shook her head. "No. I don't want to. Only sick people are in hospitals."

"Yes, that's true, Ruby," Simon said. "But they only go to get well again."

Ruby ran outside to the swings. The baby sitter followed.

"Put your coat on!" Kathy shouted. She threw herself into Simon's arms. "Oh Simon, what are we going to do? I've been a good mother, haven't I?"

"Kathy, I'm sure she'll be all right. The doctor said—"

"One in five dies. That's what you said. And the treatment. She'll lose her beautiful hair. She'll look like a slug."

Kathy turned to watch her through the kitchen window. Tears ran unheeded down her face. "And my period just started. Why aren't I getting pregnant? Why isn't it happening like the first time?" She turned to him. "Why can't we have another, Simon?"

Simon felt the ache that returned each month. "I

don't understand, darling. Maybe we could try IVF?"

Kathy looked haunted. "And now I'm going to lose my only child. It's not fair. It's not bloody fair!" She ran upstairs.

\* \* \*

Simon and Kathy had married five years earlier, at Reading University. Simon found work teaching in Bristol. Ruby soon arrived, a bright child who delighted everyone. "She's just like me," Jan had said. "Not a bit," Alan had said.

Simon and Kathy chose the house for its large garden. "It's a mess, but I can tame it."

"The curtains are horrible," Kathy had said. "They've got to go."

"Kathy, we hardly have enough for rent, let alone new curtains."

Since then Simon had transformed the grounds, with lawns, vegetables, swings, and a shiny, new greenhouse.

With a heavy heart, he called his parents. "Mum, we just heard why Ruby's not been well. We went for tests,

and I'm afraid they said it's leukemia." Simon's voice stopped working.

"No," said Jan. "Not Ruby, that's impossible."

Simon shook his head and put the phone down. When his voice returned, he called Kathy's parents. They never answered the phone. He left a message. "Just wanted to let you know. Ruby has leukemia."

He pondered whether to tell Granny Smith, now alone and getting frail. He plucked up courage and dialed.

"Now, don't you be afraid," she said. "I'll get the Gormett Girls to pray for you. They can do wonderful things, you know." *The girls? The prayers? Or the doctors?*

After a bad night, Ruby stayed in bed. Simon retreated to the comfort of his greenhouse, where he grew medicinal plants. He tinkered with the automatic watering system.

Kathy poked her head through the greenhouse door. "I'm going out." She held a tennis racket. "You're in charge of Ruby."

Suddenly, Simon felt wasted like a blown egg, all

promise and no substance. All shell and no life. You live, you die. Your children die. The night his mother threw her glass into the fire still haunted him. They did what they could. "Now it's our turn," he said to the plants. Then he knew. "That's it. I'll do it, if it kills me."

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Kathy drove several blocks and parked outside a three-story terrace. The news weighed inside like a dead baby. *Useless mother. Can't even conceive. Children are too hard. Life is . . .*

She walked to the building and rang the bell. The latch buzzed, and she climbed to the top landing. Kathy always felt guilty coming here, but it brought release.

The door opened. Mattieu was dressed in white overalls splattered with paint. Pictures and easels lined the studio. It was very warm. The comfortable smell of oil paint calmed Kathy's nerves. They hugged.

"*Tu as pleuré.*" He brushed her cheek with his finger. She nodded, and the tears came again.

"But it is so beautiful when you cry. Please, let us be

quick." Kathy shed her clothes and sat for him for an hour. "Katarina. So beautiful," he said.

Afterwards, she clung to him. "Thank you, Matti. I needed you."

\* \* \*

The following evening, Kathy answered her front door. "Mother? What—"

"I had to come immediately, darling, after the news." Dorothy Beacham, all coat and brown shoes, clutched a carpetbag and a huge bunch of flowers.

"How absolutely terrible! My poor darling. You must be devastated." Even with her hands full, her hug enveloped her daughter.

Kathy fought to keep her composure. "Why didn't you tell us you were coming?"

"No, really, Kitty P, I couldn't put you to any more trouble. The train was awful. On a Sunday. There was a match. Had to stand until Newbury. But the nice taxi man brought me right here. Anyway, I could murder a drink. Is there somewhere we can put these?" Mrs. Beacham waved her luggage and dropped her voice.

"Where is she? Upstairs? Oh, the poor darling, it's not fair. Honestly, I really can't think of anything worse. It's too awful."

"Mum, the spare room is full of—"

"Don't mind at all. You know me. Sleep anywhere. Your father sends his love, by the way. He's not been too well either, poor thing. But he's picked up a bit the last week. Back at work, of course. I told him there's no need, we're not short of a shilling. 'Mel,' I said, 'you retire next year, anyway. Why kill yourself?' But between you and me, I think he likes the cut and thrust. Money men. They're all the same."

Kathy turned to the stairs. "I'll see if I can find some sheets."

"No need for linen, darling. Those nice cotton ones Aunt Lizzie gave you would do."

Simon went to the fridge. "Sorry, Mrs. Beacham, we can only offer a wine box."

"Good Lord, Simon, do call me Dotty like everyone else. Box is fine. Any port in a storm."

Simon poured. "I can't call you Dotty."

"You must, darling. I insist. I command, even."



There, now you have no choice. Your mother-in-law commands. Cheers." She swallowed half a tumbler of wine and dropped her voice. "Oh, Lord, is she asleep? I am sorry. Dotty, you are so stupid. Now, Simon, I'm here to help. Tell me, what can I do?"

Kathy stretched the pasta three ways with extra greens from Simon's garden. "I'm afraid there's no dessert."

"Never mind, darling, I brought these." Dotty produced a large box of Swiss chocolates from the carpetbag.

Over coffee Simon asked, "How's your latest book?"

Dotty made a small pile of chocolates beside her chair. "A flop, darling. It seems no one wants to read about Princess Natasha falling in love." She leaned forward and whispered, breathing mint. "But I have another series in mind. The next one will be a bestseller. Television contracts. Movies. You wait and see. Observation, Simon. Observation."

"Obsa-what?"

"Watch people, Simon. That's the key to good

writing. People are really very funny, you know. Now, Kitty P, I asked Simon. What can I do?"

In the morning Simon left early for school. Kathy let her mother go shopping. Dotty phoned for a taxi and returned with armloads of groceries Kathy never bought. She unpacked. "You can't be without this, and this is just gorgeous, darling. An absolute must. And here's some proper coffee. Let's make a jug at once. Do you remember Camp? Quite disgusting!"

Kathy boiled the kettle and stored the shopping. "Mum, this will feed us for weeks."

Dotty flopped onto a chair. "Now this is interesting. Where's Ruby? Upstairs?" She forced a whisper. "I was just talking to a woman in the grocers who'd been to that awful Bristol Clinic, or whatever they call it." Her voice rose again. "Good Lord, it sounds frightful. You're not going to send her there, are you? She's thin enough as it is, without a starvation diet."

Kathy struggled to remain composed. She passed a cup. "Black, two sugars."

Dotty took a mouthful. "Ah, that's better. Darling, those curtains are unbelievable. What are you going to

do? Come on, we'll go to town after lunch, and see what we can find."

"I'm not sure Ruby is well enough, Mum."

The phone rang. Kathy handed it to her mother. "It's Julia. For you."

"Who?"

"Julia. Your maid. She sounded upset."

"What on earth?" Dotty took the hand-piece. "Yes?"

Kathy could hear Julia crying.

Dotty turned pale, her hand shaking. "Where? Hammersmith? Which ward?" She stared at her daughter, slowly handing her the phone. Her jaw juddered. "It's your father. Julia found him this morning. Collapsed."

Kathy cradled the phone and took her hand. "Mum, I'd come with you, but with Ruby—"

"No. Quite. I'm so sorry. I can't believe it. He . . . he was better."

"I'll call a taxi. You stay there, and I'll pack your things. Oh, Mum." Kathy stood and hugged her mother.

When the taxi came, Kathy kissed her cheek. "Sorry

I can't come."

Dotty nodded and left. Kathy returned to the chair in the kitchen and wept.

\* \* \*

The following week, Simon called Jan. "Mum, Kathy's father died yesterday."

"Oh, Si, I'm sorry. Please give her my love."

"Kathy will have to go to the funeral, and I'll be working. Can you babysit?"

Jan arrived the day before and bent to kiss Ruby. "How's my little girl, then?"

Ruby snuggled into Jan's legs. "I went to hospital, and they gave me a panda, and horrible injections."

Kathy caught the train to London. That evening Simon came home late from teaching. He dumped his briefcase in the passage, scooping his daughter into his arms. "How are you today, my precious?" He searched her face for trouble but Ruby just smiled.

"She's been as good as gold, all day," Jan said. "Haven't you, my love?"

After Simon had settled Ruby in bed, he and Jan sat

in the lounge with a coffee.

"She looks well enough," Jan said. "Are they sure it's—?"

"She gets sick a lot. After the last infection they did blood tests."

Jan shook her head. "I still can't believe it. What happens now?"

"Chemo. That will make her worse for a while. Then, hopefully, she'll get better." He didn't tell her that one in five dies.

"Poor little thing."

Simon swallowed. It was too painful. He forced a smile. "Haven't you just been to Ireland? How are my sisters?"

His mother sucked her teeth. "Isn't it terrible?"

"What do you mean?"

"They've a lovely house, by the lake. Big place. Grounds, trees. There've been there sixteen years now. There's children everywhere, and you don't know who's is which's." Jan shook her head. "Except Crystal's Ozzy. He's eighteen now, going on six. Poor man, and with a terrible temper on him. Then there's

her Amanda, just the opposite. Twelve, going on twenty." She looked askance at Simon. "Too like her mother, if you ask me."

"It seems such a waste."

"I think two of the others are my grandchildren." Jan sighed. "They don't even know who their mother is, never mind the father. There's men coming and going all hours. Denny, he's meant to be Crystal's boyfriend, but it seems to be open house. They haven't got a brass farthing, but still find money for beer and smokes. Crystal runs it really." She shook her head again. "I dunno, Simon, it's no way to live."

Simon knew they lived together, but hadn't expected this. "I do love my daughter," Granny Smith had said. "Like I love my sisters," he'd replied. Yes, he still loved them. There didn't seem to be much love around in free love experiments. Not that his own marriage was any easier. Where had they all gone wrong?

"Oh, I forgot," Jan waved two envelopes. "There's some post for you."

Simon tore open the first. "Ruby's chemo begins

next week. Here's one from the university." Simon scanned it and grinned. "Yes! Got it, Mum."

"Got what?" Jan said.

"Lecturer in plant sciences at Bristol University. Can't wait to tell Kathy."

"Well, that sounds good. What does it mean?"

"It means a big pay rise, and teaching at a higher level. Maybe even research. That's what I really want to do. Plants hold the future, mother, for all of us."

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The next morning, Simon drove to the station to meet Kathy's train. He loaded her bag and eased into the traffic. Lorries splashed the puddles. "How was the funeral?"

She gazed out of the car window. "He left us fifty thousand."

"What?"

She turned, her face alight. "We can finally leave Bristol, Simon. We can afford a house."

Simon shook his head. "We can't leave now, Kathy. There's the new greenhouse, and I got the job at the

university. I start after Christmas."

"Well, bully for you, but I'm not staying in this stinking town any longer."

"I didn't realize you didn't like it here."

"Like it? I hate it. It's given me nothing, except a child with cancer. I am leaving. You can stay if you want to. Without me."

Simon took a deep breath. They'd just been given fifty thousand pounds and were arguing like cat and dog. Again. Kathy must be more upset about her father than he'd realized.

At home, she hugged Ruby for a long, long time. "I'm going to take you away from this stinking place," she said. "And we're going to buy a house."

"Really?" Jan said. "That's good news. Where?"

"I don't care, as long as it's not in Bristol." Kathy looked at Simon. "And has a big garden."

"Funny you should say that," Jan said. "Some friends are selling their place. They've a big garden."

Kathy turned to Jan. "Where?"

"Cam, not far from us. Going cheap, they said."

"That's impossible," said Simon. "It's miles from



Bristol. I couldn't—"

Kathy grabbed his arm. "At least can we look? Please?"

They left Ruby with Jan and drove to the village. The house was empty, with dead eyes.

Kathy jumped out of the car. "Oh, Simon, it's perfect, and the garden is huge."

Simon climbed out and walked to the fence. "There's tennis courts across the field. But it's too far from the university, Kathy. The traffic—"

"Let's ask how much it is."

They drove to the estate agents. "It needs a bit of work," the agent said, "hence the low price. If you're a commuter, the Cam Railway Station will reopen next year."

On the way home, Kathy said, "We can afford it, Simon. And you can have three greenhouses."

"I've been thinking, Kathy. I've always been interested in medicinal plants. Now I want to take a PhD. Finding a cure for Ruby's cancer is going to be my life's work."

"If she lives that long."