

A person with short, curly hair, wearing a dark hooded coat and a patterned skirt, stands with their back to the camera in a vast, green field. They are looking towards a horizon where a bright sunset or sunrise is taking place, with a large, dark, dramatic cloud formation on the right side of the sky. The overall mood is contemplative and serene.

WALKING TOWARD THE LIGHT

A JOURNEY IN FORGIVENESS AND DEATH

KAREN TODD SCARPULLA

A Walking Beyond Series Book

Walking Toward the Light

A journey in forgiveness and death

by Karen Todd Scarpulla

Little White Dog Press

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This book is a memoir: The author has made every attempt to recreate events, locales and conversations from her memories of them. In order to maintain their anonymity, the author may have changed or may have left out the names of individuals, places and identifying characteristics and details such as physical properties, occupations and places of residence.

This book is not intended as a substitute for the medical advice of a physician. The reader should regularly consult a physician in matters relating to his/her health and particularly with respect to any symptoms that may require diagnosis or medical attention.

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This book is dedicated to the bravest people I know, my son James and my daughter Kate, who agreed to take this journey with me.

Thank you for allowing me to share our story. You inspire me everyday to reach for the stars.

INTRODUCTION

In 2005, my husband of 16 years and I divorced for many of the same reasons most couples do. Our divorce was less than amicable and we had a very rocky relationship in the years after.

Seven years later, I made the bold decision to move my children and myself back in with my ex-husband. Why? He'd just been diagnosed with Stage IV esophageal cancer. His life would be cut short, and his kids would have only a few precious months left with him.

This book is a month-by-month chronicle of our journey through cancer, death and forgiveness. Each month explores a new challenge and all of the decisions we faced as a family struggling with a loved one dying. We were unprepared for the sacrifices and difficulties inherent in allowing a family member to die at home.

Through journal entries, I share the emotions I experienced amidst making the heart-wrenching decision to focus on his quality of life versus his quantity of life. We all live with the fear of death, but it is a natural part of life's process. My children and I experienced firsthand the grace that happens when you let go of that fear.

I share with you my path to forgiveness. I provide you with the framework that I used to create forgiveness and truly live it on a daily basis. I had often heard how powerful forgiveness is, but I had so many emotional scars that I didn't think it possible. When I consciously focused on creating a plan to forgive and carried it through, I felt empowered and filled with grace. Forgiving is not easy but the rewards are worth the journey.

This is my story... It began November 15th, 2011.

CHAPTER ONE

NOVEMBER — SYNCHRONICITY

I am driving home at the end of a very long day at the office. The night is dark and cold, and I cannot wait to get home and take a long and much-deserved hot bath.

Almost four years ago, I launched a marketing company, and this year, I have taken on a business partner. We have decided to expand the business from marketing and sales development to include training workshops for small business owners, as well. The task has been daunting. We've developed the curriculum, marketing plan and, ultimately, a sales funnel. We have taken on office space and increased the overhead needed to run the company. While I really enjoy the flexibility of owning my own business, I am constantly worried about growing it and maintaining revenue flow. I am preoccupied with thoughts of upcoming meetings when suddenly my phone rings.

It's Vince, my ex-husband.

I grip the steering wheel and ask myself if I am up for one of his calls. We divorced six years ago but I still have anxiety when we speak. He usually rages at me about some injustice that has happened to him, how life is not going his way or how God is punishing him. On the third ring, I contemplate just letting the call roll to voicemail. Instead, I take a deep breath and answer.

"Hi, Vince!"

Maybe my chipper attitude will help set the tone for a positive exchange.

"Karen, I just wanted to call and let you know that I just left my endoscopy, and it's not good news," he says. "I have cancer."

Cancer.

The word takes my breath away. I am paralyzed and cannot speak. I then remember that Vince can often be melodramatic for my benefit. He has called me many times in the past to spout off about his health issues. Eventually, they all turned out to be very minor problems. I take a deep breath again and reassure myself that this is one of those times.

I can barely hear Vince as he begins to talk.

"It's bad, Karen. The doctor told me that he doesn't know how I have been eating. I have a tumor that is taking up 75% of my esophagus and another tumor in my stomach taking up 50%."

I feel like I am going to be sick. I look up at the road and wonder how I am still driving. *Maybe I should pull over?*

"He said they are the largest tumors he has ever seen. He took biopsies and is sending the pathology to my primary doctor. It's not good, Karen."

"I'm sorry. I'm so sorry, Vince. I don't know what to say except, I am sorry."

"I've already told James," Vince says.

Immediately, I am reengaged. *Why did he tell James?* Wouldn't it be better to wait until he has more information? James must be so scared. During times of stress, Vince often leans on the kids for

emotional support as if they are adults. I can only imagine the conversation he had with James.

"I will tell Kate when I see her next," Vince adds.

"Vince, I am so very sorry. We'll get through this."

I pull into the driveway and run into the house to the nearest bathroom. Life has just kicked me the stomach. I can feel my lunch turning, and suddenly it explodes out of my body.

My phone rings again. I am numb. I don't want to answer, but it is my real estate agent, and she rarely calls unless she needs something.

"Hello?"

"Hi, Karen. I have some good news for you. The couple who was in twice to look at your house bringing in an offer tonight. I will send it over via email as soon as I have it ready."

"That's great news." My voice is completely flat.

"Is everything okay?" she asks.

"Yes, everything is great. Long day. That's really great news. Talk to you tomorrow."

I hang up.

Kate, my daughter, has wandered into the kitchen.

"What's going on?"

"We just got an offer on the house."

"That's good, right?"

"Yes, of course."

"Have you talked to Dad?"

"Yes, I did briefly."

"I tried to call him, but he didn't pick up," Kate says. "I want to know how his appointment went."

Vince had shared with the children that he was having an endoscopy to rule out cancer. I had initially assured Kate she shouldn't worry and that the test was just a precaution. He would be fine. He probably just had a really bad case of acid reflux. How wrong I was.

My phone rings yet again. This time it's James.

"Hi, Buddy," I say.

"I talked to Dad. He says he has cancer."

"Yes."

I choose my words carefully, because Kate is standing nearby.

"So, you know?" he asks.

"Yes. How are you?"

"I'm fine. I don't think it's as bad as he thinks. He hasn't even seen the doctor yet."

"You're right," I say.

But deep down, I am concerned and worried it really is a big deal. Kate asks to speak with James so I put her on the phone.

"Have you talked to Dad?" Kate asks. "What did he say?"

Kate gets frustrated and shoves the phone back at me.

"What the hell?" James says. "Why did you put her on the phone? You really put me on the spot. Thanks a lot."

He is absolutely right.

"I'm sorry."

What am I thinking putting Kate on the phone? I have to pull myself together, and, more importantly, I need to consider my actions carefully. I don't want to alarm or upset the kids anymore.

than necessary. James is right. We do not have enough news yet to really worry.

“I’ll call you later,” he says.

Kate runs by me with her car keys in hand. “I’m going to Dad’s house,” she calls over her shoulder.

“Wait. I’ll drive you.”

I can’t imagine how upset she will be once she hears the news, and I don’t want her behind the wheel of a car. She has only had her license for a few weeks.

Before I can get to the door, she is gone.

I call Vince to let him know Kate is on her way.

“I know,” he says. “She just called me.”

“Does she know?”

“No. I want to tell her in person.”

“She should not drive home alone after you speak to her. Please call me, and I will pick her up.”

“I can drive her home. She can pick her car up later.”

“Okay. Thank you. And Vince, please know how sorry I am.”

“Thanks.”

I hang up the phone and have a very strong feeling that all will not be well, and Vince could die. My grief for James and Kate overcomes me.

James is 18 years old and Kate is 16. Neither of them has had a very close relationship with Vince. He has never been a hands-on father. During our marriage, he was away from the family, traveling Monday through Friday for work. The births of both of our children were completely planned, and Vince enjoyed the title of father; however, he never settled into the role. Even when Vince was home with us, he remained distant. He spent his time relaxing, reading the paper, working out and watching sports.

After the divorce, the distance between father and son and father and daughter continued to grow. Vince requested visitation every other weekend. He was supposed to pick the kids up Friday night and return them Sunday evening. However, he usually cut his visits short, either for social reasons or for his work travel schedule. Often the weekend would simply end early because there had been some “Vince” catastrophe—like he had spilled a cup of coffee on the carpet, or he had put a bill backwards in its corresponding mailing envelope.

Vince sees himself as the victim in everything, especially our divorce, because I’m the one who made the decision. During the process, Vince used the children as his emotional crutch. They were only 10 and 8 at the time and not old enough to fully understand.

As the same-sex parent, I was able to build a relationship with Kate; however, James’ same-sex parent was absent in his life. I pleaded with Vince to take a more active role with the kids and consider their feelings during their weekend visits.

At one point, I forced all three of them to see a family counselor, hoping an unbiased, outside party might reach Vince. The children were understandably upset by our divorce. They needed Vince to be the adult and support them emotionally. Unfortunately, the counseling lasted just two sessions before the kids refused to attend. Their reason was very clear. Vince did not listen to the therapist. Each time the children shared their emotions about a particular situation, Vince would come at them with something they had done wrong. It became an episode of the blame game, and this left the children feeling even more vulnerable and isolated when they were with him.

As James matured, his relationship with his father completely deteriorated. Vince saw his own flaws in James and couldn’t bear to witness them. Instead of understanding that James was just modeling behavior he had learned from his father, Vince attacked him emotionally. By the time James entered high school, he barely spoke to Vince. And when they did speak, their conversations centered

solely on sports, a safe subject.

Of course, the children's relationships with Vince impacted my relationship with each of them. I became an overindulgent parent trying to make up for their feelings of abandonment. James was angry during high school, and I don't think we had a single conversation during those years that did not end in an argument. James spent the last two years of high school at a boarding school. He was much happier living in a supportive environment with plenty of adult mentors.

Now back from boarding school, James lives with Vince. He prefers that arrangement to living with me, because he does not have to abide by any rules.

Kate lives with me. We have a strong relationship, but it's not without its troubles. While I was growing a career, both she and James felt abandoned. I went back to work just six months after the divorce. Up until then, I was a stay-at-home mom. Fortunately, I was offered a job with a marketing agency covering a very large account. On the Thursday I received my offer, I was told I would need to be on a plane Monday to New York for meetings with the clients and their agency. I scrambled over the weekend to hire the first of a string of nannies who would care for the children several days a week. I tried to minimize the impact of my going back to work by working from home two out of five days. Both kids hated this time in their lives. I was traveling and trying to rebuild a career after a 1.5 year absence. We tried many nannies and never really found the perfect fit. Two years after the divorce, I launched my own marketing agency and began mostly working from home. This allowed me more flexibility. However, by then, James and I were totally at odds, and he barely saw Vince.

I pace the floor, fold clothes, wash dishes and pace the floor some more.

A couple of hours go by, and I finally hear the garage door open. Vince must be dropping her off. I run to the door and open it to see her pulling into the garage. *Damn! How could he let her drive home alone?*

"Are you okay?" I ask. Nothing prepares you for talking to your kids about their father's cancer. There were only guidebooks so I would know how to react and what to say.

"I'm going across the street," she says. "I just want to be with my friends right now."

"Okay. Are you sure?"

I am wounded. She obviously does not feel close enough to me to share her pain. But I quickly realize that this is not about me. This is about James and Kate and how they will navigate their feelings about Vince's illness.

I give her a hug. "Okay. I will see you when you get home."

I walk back inside and dissolve into tears. I'm not even sure why I am crying, but the tears flow and flow. The memories of us being a family and of the early years rush through my mind. I am surprised to feel my heart fill with empathy for Vince.

I jump on the treadmill for 30 minutes of walking and 30 minutes of running. This workout is part of my daily routine, but as I hit start on the console and find the belt moving beneath me, my workout feels completely different.

I could not sleep the night before. I kept wondering how Vince will get through chemo and radiation treatments and manage to take care of himself. My head swims with questions. How will he feed himself? Who will drive him to chemo? Who will take care of him when he is too sick to get out of bed?

I know he will naturally rely on Kate. Since our divorce, Vince depends on Kate for emotional support. ~~He confides in her as if she were an adult friend. I am very concerned that he will expect Kate to drop everything and take care of him.~~ She is in her junior year, one of the most important as she prepares for college. I envision Kate running back and forth between our houses caring for Vince and studying at home.

The thought makes me amp up the speed for my run. I feel the anxiety present in each stride.

I know Vince very well, and he will need someone to care for him. If there is no one in Chicago to assume this role, he will move back east to live with his mother so she can help. I worry that if he goes to Philadelphia, the children will never see him.

Suddenly, I feel as if the curtains have been pulled back to reveal the answer. I know what needs to be done: Kate and I will move in with Vince and James.

It's not a coincidence that I'm about to receive an offer on the house after it's been on the market for three years. The universe has a funny way of working things out. If I provide support to Vince then maybe he will stay in Chicago. The children can spend quality time with him and rebuild the relationship. I know deep in my heart that this is the "right thing" to do. I have faith that this will be a turning point for Vince. That he will embrace spending time with the children.

Despite my resolve, I am worried. I worked so hard to divorce Vince, and it was such a scary process. Why would I choose to live with him again?

I slow my pace to a walk, grab my cell and call my mother to tell her everything.

"Why don't you just have Vince and James move in with you at your house?" she suggests.

"Great idea," I tell her, "except I'm pretty sure the house is going to sell. Who knows when I will get another offer?"

I had decided three years earlier to put the house on the market. Between boarding school tuition and the monthly cost to maintain the house, I was drowning financially. I had allowed the kids to stay in their house as long as I could. It was time to sell; however, the housing market had taken a steep dive. There was a surplus of houses on the market in our price range and hardly any buyers.

When my mother and I hang up, I feel even more resolve. My mother supports my decision and understands my desire to have the children mend their relationship with Vince.

Vince has recently been laid off from his job, so he is home all the time now. This will be an excellent opportunity for him to be a hands-on father. I am working long hours and traveling, so he will have quality time with just the kids.

I call my best friend. She doesn't even question me.

"I would expect nothing less of you," she says.

We talk out the logistics for a bit and then say goodbye. I am relieved that two people have confirmed that I am not absolutely crazy.

Next, I call Vince.

"Hi. Vince. How are you doing?"

"Not great. I'm having trouble swallowing and I can't eat or drink first thing in the morning."

"I'm sorry," I say. "Hey, I have meetings downtown this morning but was wondering if I could stop by in the afternoon on my way home to talk to you about something?"

It's a sunny day and the drive out of the city is quick and uneventful. I take this as a positive sign from the universe that I am moving in the right direction. I call a few more friends from the car and run my crazy idea by them. Everyone agrees, and they are not surprised at my gesture.

I'm sure Vince is dreading my visit.

Frankly, we dislike each other a lot. Ironically, during our marriage we never argued. Vince would often rage, yell, scream or throw a tantrum, but I very rarely responded. Any response would only escalate the situation, so I became desensitized to his wrath.

Vince and I were married in June of 1988. I was just 23 years old at the time, and Vince had just turned 30. We had been married for 16 years at the time of our divorce. It was a contentious and very scary time for me as I negotiated myself out of my marriage. Vince pleaded and threatened. He was incredulous that I wanted to leave.

Our dysfunctional relationship set up a dangerous parenting dynamic. Vince would be very punitive with the kids, especially James. I would try to make up for his negative parenting style with overly permissive parenting. Neither style is healthy for teenage children. We had both created a real mess over the years.

Now, our anger with each other no longer mattered to me. I love my children more than anything else and I am willing to sacrifice anything for them. I am committed to helping them make peace with their father before it is too late.

If Vince becomes really sick and dies, it will be even more important for James and Kate to mend their relationships with him. I don't want them to have to go through years of therapy because they had unfinished business or left anything unsaid. I know this is what we need to do as a family to heal.

I pull into Vince's driveway and approach the kitchen door. He is sitting in the living room with the TV on. He turns it off as I enter, and I take a seat in a chair directly across from him.

He tells me that he has spent the day calling family and friends to share the news with them.

This is Vince's style. He creates a catastrophe before we know all the facts.

I shift awkwardly in the chair. My throat is dry as I begin to speak. "So I have a crazy idea," I say. "I just heard last night that I will be receiving an offer on my house this week."

"You're kidding. That's great news. Congratulations. You must be really relieved."

"Yes I am. So, my crazy idea is that Kate and I should move in with you and James. This way we can live as a family while you battle cancer."

Vince is visibly stunned. I wait for a reaction.

A single tear streams down his cheek. When he speaks, his voice cracks. "You would do that?"

"I'm convinced that getting an offer on my house is not a coincidence," I say. "It's synchronicity, divine intervention. Think about it. Who will take care of you while you are sick? And this is a great opportunity for you to spend quality time with the kids before they go off to college."

We both sit silently for a long while.

"I don't know what to say."

I immediately feel the need to fill the silence. "So when is your doctor's appointment to hear the pathology report?"

"Friday afternoon."

"Do you want me to come with you? You should have someone there to hear what the doctor has to say."

"That would be great."

I can see he is visibly relieved.

"Let's talk to the kids about moving in and your diagnosis after we see your doctor in a couple of days."

"Sounds like a good plan."

There is an awkward moment as I rise to leave. Vince stands, and I think he may try to hug me. Although our meeting has gone well, I'm not ready for that kind of intimacy.

I pat his arm. "Everything will be okay. We will get through this as a family."

Vince picks me up on a Friday to meet with his primary physician who is also my doctor. We expect to be ushered into his office, but instead, we are sent to an examination room. Vince sits on the examination table, and I take the only chair. I think that at any moment the doctor will tell the nurse she has made a mistake and move us to his office.

The past few days have flown by. I've been busy with work and consumed with thoughts about negotiating the sale of my home. Usually a move brings excitement, but in this case, I will be moving in with my ex-husband.

I am resolved in my decision to live with Vince, but I am feeling apprehensive. I am worried that I won't be able to keep my feelings contained and that memories from the past will eat away at the present tasks at hand.

The doctor enters. He looks uncomfortable.

"So," he says, "I have received the pathology on your biopsies. Unfortunately, I wish I had better news. You have Stage IV adenoma carcinoma cancer."

My mouth drops open. I had done a little research online regarding types of esophageal cancer and its stages. He has the most aggressive type of cancer, and Stage IV is the end.

Vince looks at me and sees my reaction. I quickly close my mouth, grab my phone and begin taking notes.

Vince asks the doctor if we can conference in his cousin, who is also a physician. Once on speakerphone, Vince's cousin asks a string of questions.

"What is the recommended course of treatment at this point?"

Our primary physician suggests that we contact an oncologist immediately, but that any treatment would be palliative.

"So treatment will be palliative versus curative?" Vince's cousin asks.

"Yes."

Vince looks confused. "What does palliative care mean?" he asks.

Vince's physician, who had been leaning on the counter, stands up and takes a deep breath. He exhales slowly. "That means we will keep you as comfortable as possible until the end."

His words strip the color from Vince's face. Vince looks at me with pleading eyes. I can't speak.

"I am sorry to give you this news," the doctor says. "The nurse will be back to draw some blood and check your levels."

He leaves us sitting in silence. I cannot look at Vince. I am ashamed that I don't know what to say. I have always been the fixer in our relationship, and this is something I can't fix. I know that anything I say now will sound completely inadequate.

"Karen?" Vince breaks the silence first. "Did he say I am going to die?"

I turn in my chair and look up at him through tears. "Yes."

Vince begins to cry, too.

The nurse arrives to draw blood.

At some point, we leave the doctor's office. We are silent as we walk to the car.

My phone rings.

It is my real estate agent.

"Hi, Karen. Great news, I finally have the offer. It's a good offer, close to your asking price."

"That's great."

"There is one thing that we may need to discuss."

"What's that?"

"They are looking for a 30-day close."

“What! Are you kidding me? That means I would have to move out before Christmas?”

“Yes. I’m sorry.”

“No! No! And no! Absolutely no way. Who asks a family to move out right before the holidays?”

Vince listens to my end of the conversation. He reaches over and puts his hand on my arm. “You have somewhere to go. Just say, ‘yes.’ You don’t want to lose the offer.”

I take a deep breath.

“Send it over. I will make it work.”

Vince and I drive home in silence. All I can think about is James and Kate and that they will lose their father. Even though they are not close, it will still be a devastating loss.

The next few hours I attempt to work in my home office and return emails. I cannot concentrate. My thoughts keep returning to Vince and the fact that he is dying of cancer. I begin the process of keeping a journal, hoping it will help me manage my thoughts and emotions.

November 18, 2011

My heart aches for Kate and James. How will they handle this news? I am absolutely numb.

I need a drink. A very strong vodka martini with blue cheese olives sounds really good right now. I wish I had someone who I could call, so I could escape for just a few hours. Someplace to run to and deny the suffocating knowledge that Vince is going to die. I just want to forget for a while.

Kate is out with friends, and I won’t have to pick her up this evening. I can’t find any vodka in the house, so I decide to open a bottle of cabernet. Two glasses in, my phone rings. It’s James.

“Are you crazy?” he screams at me.

“What are you talking about?”

“I just overheard Dad telling someone that you and Kate are moving in?”

“Yes. We are. Your dad is very sick, and we think it is the best thing to do. This way you and your sister can spend time with him.”

“You’re divorced and you worked so hard to get divorced. Why would you want to live with Dad again? This is the stupidest idea! Does Kate know?”

“No. Not yet. We are having a family dinner on Sunday to discuss it.”

“I won’t be there. This is a really dumb idea. If you move in, I’m moving out. You and I can’t live together. And where is everyone supposed to sleep?”

James and I have had a strained relationship through high school, so I am not surprised that he has no interest in living under the same roof again.

“James, you are just going to have to trust me. This is the best thing for everyone. Your father is going to need lots of help, and I don’t want the burden to fall on you and Kate.”

My mind feels foggy. Too much wine and no food all day is not the best combination. I know James is worried that I will step in with a bunch of rules. I assure James that I am there to be Kate’s parent, that he is a grown up and I no longer need to parent him.

After I hang up, I pour another glass of wine and sit on my bedroom floor. My primary concern is to make sure James and Kate have the opportunity to build a better relationship with Vince. They will have a chance to connect with him in a very different way than they have before. I will have to look past all the scars that were created when we were married. I will need to wear an invisible suit

armor against Vince's words.

~~A new fear begins to grip me. I am scared I may not be strong enough to stand up to Vince and his uncontrollable temper. Big heavy sobs come deep from within my heart. I again feel the pain of all the harsh words and broken promises of our marriage. I am buried under a blanket of painful emotions.~~

I come to the realization that I have only sadness to battle. My empathy for Vince begins to overshadow any anger or resentment I used to feel. No one deserves to die alone.

In the midst of packing my house, I also accompany Vince to all of his doctor appointments. Vince's local oncologist has a patient and calm demeanor and puts Vince at ease. We leave our first meeting with some hope that Vince will be able to buy some time.

I tell Vince that this would be a good time to sit down and discuss expectations and our financial arrangement before I move in. We are both hungry so we stop for some lunch at our local deli.

I am currently receiving child support for Kate and I am concerned with losing this financial support. I know that I will be spending quite a bit of time away from my work, helping Vince with doctor's appointments and taking care of him when he is sick. When I am not working I am not generating billable hours, so I am anxious about whether I will be able to continue to generate the revenue required to meet overhead expenses for the company.

Financial conflict has always been a theme in our marriage. I was privileged enough to be a stay-at-home mom; however, Vince always resented that I did not contribute financially to the household. I did my best to manage all aspects of family life and to support Vince and his career in anyway I could. I thought of us as a team. I took care of anything Vince needed so he could focus on his career. I often hosted last-minute dinner parties and manager meetings at our home. While we were married, I took great pride in caring for Vince and our family. These days, I joke that I would be so much more successful if I had a wife like myself.

"We should talk about our expectations of living together and what your expectations are financially," I say when we sit down to eat.

"You are doing me a favor, so I will pay for everything. I don't want you to worry about anything. I will take care of everything."

"Okay," I say, but deep down I am uneasy. Vince likes for people to know he has money and that his wealth was self-made. He is great at making grand gestures, but most of the time he rarely delivers on his promises, especially financial ones.

Early on in our marriage his gestures to pay for things generally never panned out. In the late '80s I graduated from college, and began seeking interviews for jobs with advertising agencies. We were living in Baltimore, Maryland at the time, which did not have a large advertising market. I was extremely excited when I secured an interview with a top New York advertising agency with offices in Baltimore. I called Vince to share the news. I had just sent out my resumé earlier in the week. They called me on Thursday morning to schedule an interview for that afternoon. I was very young and had never been on a "real" interview. I asked Vince what I should wear.

"You need to go to the department store and buy a really nice grey or black suit. I'll pay for it as a graduation gift," he said. "Just open up a store credit card and charge it. I will pay the bill when it comes in. Good luck."

I appreciated his guidance. He had been working in a sales environment for six years and had far more experience than I did. I drove to the store, purchased a suit and made it to my interview in plenty of time. It was a beautiful grey suit that cost \$325, a lot of money back then. I felt so professional and I am proud to say I was offered the job. Unfortunately, when the department store bill arrived, Vince

had decided that since I was working, I should pay for my own suit. I was so hurt and too young and naïve to call him out on it.

These past experiences make me feel skeptical regarding Vince's new promise to take care of all of the expenses. For some reason, I feel the need to justify to him my need for continued financial help.

"I am concerned about losing your monthly support," I say in between bites of my sandwich. "I'm still paying off debt from James' boarding school tuition."

"Just tell me how much you need each month," he says.

I feel guilty asking for his financial assistance. If I were more successful, then I would not need to rely on his child support.

"Let me think about it," I say.

I wonder if Vince understands the sacrifice I am making for not only the children but also for him. I will be living in a 10-by-12-foot bedroom as a visitor in his house. The things that had made my own home feel like home will be packed away. I will not be able to date or have a social life while I live with him and the children. My life will be on hold.

CHAPTER TWO

DECEMBER — THE GIFT

December 18, 2011

Today is moving day. I haven't even had time to create closure with the home where I have raised my children for 16 years. With the help of many friends, we have packed a 5,000-square-foot home in 30 days. I sold every piece of furniture in our home within 24 hours. The only pieces we will take to Vince's are the children's beds and two special items.

I am getting ready to turn my life upside down and I am sick with fear. I am trembling. I am so very scared that I will allow him to change me again. I am afraid I won't be able to handle the stress of watching someone who I was once close to die.

The movers feverishly load the truck. Colored tags adorn the boxes, indicating whether they are for Vince's house, storage or donation. Some of my neighbors have stopped by to say goodbye. Everyone keeps talking about what a noble thing I am doing. Their acknowledgement and compliments make me uncomfortable. *Isn't this what anyone else would do?* Am I crazy for moving back in with someone that reduced me to a shell when we were married?

Our marriage wasn't always difficult. We had some very good years, especially the years while we were starting our family. Vince was attentive and really tried to be a good husband. But after a while he began chipping away at my self-esteem little by little. As I think about this, I begin to have doubts about my decision to move in, but there is no time to stop.

"We are ready to go," a mover calls out. That's it. I switch off my feelings and operate on autopilot.

When we arrive at Vince's, he announces that he is leaving to run errands. It's just like Vince to disappear. My exhaustion is the only thing that tempers my anger. Even as I make this very grand gesture, he is incapable of supporting anyone but himself. I am incredulous that he can't even hang around to offer to pick up lunch for everyone. He could have ordered pizzas or picked up sandwiches. Instead, I am forced to pull Kate and her friends off their tasks of unpacking to get food.

I think Vince is feeling even more uncomfortable than I am. He doesn't deal with change very well. I'm moving in and changing his environment. That must put him on edge. Vince has never been one to consider other people's emotions or welfare. Today I am giving him a priceless gift. Certainly, he should be overcome with humility and want to be as helpful as possible, but his car vanishes down

the street as the movers begin unloading our belongings.

Vince's departure has left me on the brink of tears. I have to hold it together for Kate, though. This is a good thing...moving in as a family while Vince dies. I tell myself that over and over again as I stand in the driveway directing boxes.

One of Vince's next door neighbors comes over to say, 'hello.' She wraps her arms around me and gives me a big hug. My eyes once again swell with tears.

"You are an angel for moving in here. There are not many people who would do what you are doing."

I want to scream at the top of my lungs, "This is not my life. I'm living someone else's life. Doesn't anyone see that this isn't my life?"

I am really beginning to doubt how I will get through this. I feel so alone. I thank her for welcoming me. I inhale deeply and solemnly walk inside to begin this journey...our journey toward the light.

I spend the next two days unpacking. I am aware that clutter puts Vince on edge. I try to put everything away as quickly as possible. Every night I navigate through a forest of wardrobe boxes to get to my bed, which really isn't mine. My bed was sold with my home, so I sleep on the guest bed. The mattress is very old, and my room is an array of misfit leftover lamps and furniture. I feel so out of place.

Two days later, I return back to my old home to pick up some final items. Vince has insisted on coming with me so he can say goodbye to the house. *Didn't he say his goodbyes when he moved out seven years ago?* Why is he determined to encroach on my private moment? I am so angry. I go upstairs to begin checking for any items that have been left behind. I walk into Kate's bedroom and am overpowered with emotion. A flood of home videos begins streaming through my mind. I move from room to room, and the memories continue to overwhelm me. Sixteen years have gone by in the blink of an eye. I have that feeling I get when I've just finished reading a really good book. I wish I could go back and read it again for the first time.

In honor of Christmas, we have always decorated our house from top to bottom, giving each room a different theme: snowmen, Santa, holiday fruits and candies, and bears. I remember how much Vince loved having the house decorated for the holidays. Our 10-foot Christmas tree adorned with hand-blown glass ornaments was his favorite.

While Vince is away, I suggest to Kate that we decorate his house. Somehow I know that this will be his last Christmas with us. We dig through the storage garage and load all of the decorations, including the Christmas tree, into two SUVs for the ride to Vince's. I encourage Kate to take charge. I want this to be her very special gift to Vince.

Ever since the children were little, we'd made it a tradition to purchase a new hand-blown ornament for every member of the family at Christmas. I always choose something that represents a milestone from the past year. Each and every ornament on the tree has a special story behind it. The tree is adorned with glass soccer balls, horses, buildings from Italy and Chicago, all representing

special moments for our family. This year I have decided to purchase an ornament for Vince...a angel. She is dressed in white and has blonde hair and an angelic smile. She represents faith and my desire that someone watch over him.

Decorating the tree takes several hours. I carefully unwrap each ornament and hand them one by one to Kate. She places them with care on the boughs. We add ribbons, silk flowers and a beautiful glass tree topper. The tree sparkles with hundreds of white twinkle lights and the hope of the holiday. Vince's house looks amazing. Every inch is wrapped in holiday cheer.

A parade of Santas marches up the stairway. Crystallized fruit garland swirls around the railing. Bright red holly berries adorn the doorways. Embroidered pillows with Christmas wishes hang from every knob in the house. Ornaments on ribbon dangle from tulle-covered chandeliers. And tulle and stockings line the mantel.

Kate waits in the living room for Vince to return. He walks in and is overcome with the glittering, sparkling lights of the season. He cries as he takes in the amazing gift his daughter has given him. This sets the stage for a Christmas focused on our reunited family.

We prepare to spend Christmas in Philadelphia with Vince's family. But before we leave, we plan to have Christmas at home, just the four of us.

This will be our first Christmas together in more than seven years. It is a simpler Christmas, unlike previous holidays, where we ate lavish meals and exchanged extravagant gifts. Vince's prognosis is not good, and we are aware that this may be his last Christmas with us. We want to spend it focusing on the important things rather than the material. I order a simple dinner from the local Italian restaurant. We eat and take turns watching each other unwrap small gifts.

Everyone appears a little uncomfortable, but we manage to have a few laughs. The kids eventually retreat to their bedrooms in the basement, and I am left alone with Vince. We are uncomfortable as we struggle to make small talk. I assure myself that the awkwardness will lessen as time goes on.

Vince comes from a large Italian family. During our marriage, I had always been the one to maintain our relationships with his family members. I was incredibly close to both his parents, especially his father. We spoke everyday by phone and we always ended the conversation with, "I love you." He passed away 13 years ago after a tragic complication from a knee replacement. After his death, I missed him terribly. I've often wondered if things would have ended differently for Vince and I if his father were still around. As I write this now, I still feel a profound sense of loss, and I realize that Vince will soon see his father again.

Vince picks Kate and I up at the airport (James is scheduled to arrive later), and we go straight to his mother's house. The move has been grueling, and I am exhausted. I've thrown myself into participating in a family Christmas for James and Kate's benefit without even considering how I might feel. Now that we are at Vince's family home, I am having a tough time keeping my emotions in check, and I feel the old resentments and anger start to bubble up. I feel like I am having an out-of-body experience.

Everyone in Vince's family is welcoming, loving and gracious when I arrive. They include me in everything, and it is as if Vince and I never divorced. Unfortunately, this makes me even more uncomfortable. I try to make small talk. I busy myself with the tasks of cooking and then the cleaning up after meals, but my awkwardness persists. I am going through the motions, but no one even notices.

This is going to be much harder than I imagined. I have not forgotten all the broken vows and promises of our marriage and I am drowning under the sad memories. I recognize that I will have to forgive and forget. Where do I even start?

CHAPTER THREE

JANUARY—THE CHEMO MONSTER

January 1, 2012

New Year's Day. I lie in bed breathing deeply, trying to slow my heartbeat. Traditionally, this is the day when people are all hung over after a long night of celebrating that the previous year has ended and a new year of promise stretches out before them.

This will not be a year of new beginnings for me. It will be one of the hardest years of my life. I am consumed with fear for all that will happen in 2012. I am scared of how I will handle continuing to live with Vince. I feel like a guest in his home and I can't seem to find a comfortable spot. My room is down the hall from his, and I am having trouble making it feel like a safe haven. My heart beats so very fast, and my chest feels so tight.

I drown in my emotions. I am sad for my children who will lose their father. He is much sicker than anyone knows. I am sad for Vince who will die far too young and will miss seeing his children become young adults and raise families of their own. I am terrified for myself. Will I handle all the pressure that Vince puts on me? Will I still be able to run a company, and most importantly, will I be able to take the best care of my children?

With our encouragement, James has decided to take a year off from school and live at home. At first, James did not agree with us; however, the timing could not have been better. Staying home this year will allow him to spend time with Vince. Even though they have been living together for several months, they have yet to learn to communicate with one another. Vince tries desperately to mold James into a version of himself. Most of their communications turn into lectures from Vince. Their interactions leave James feeling like he doesn't measure up, and they widen the rift between them.

I think James believes that Vince does not deserve to have his family around him, because Vince made very little effort to keep his family together. James questions why everyone forgets—just because Vince is sick—all the things Vince has done to our family. James sees Vince's ego front and center. He knows that, even stricken with cancer, his father has not changed. James is a pragmatic young man, and he feels like Vince never gave him time or respect. Why should James now spend time with his father when the man never tried to be a dad?

James stays busy delivering sandwiches for a well-known sandwich shop. He works afternoon and early evening shifts five to six days a week, so he is able to avoid spending time with Vince. When he is home, he retreats to his own room in the basement and barely speaks to anyone. I am careful not to push James to engage with us too much. He and I have a very fragile relationship. I have been th

disciplinarian in his life, and that has put me in a very unlikable role. I prefer to give James lots of space, now, and to let him make his own decisions.

Most afternoons, I find Kate lying on Vince's bed telling him about her day at school. When Vince was first diagnosed, I was very concerned about the pressure his illness would place on Kate. I did not want her to fall into a caretaker role. That would be far too much responsibility for a 16-year-old. I have assumed the role of caring for Vince, so that the children can enjoy as much quality time with him as possible. I think deep inside Kate knows her time with her father is limited, so she soaks up every minute with him. Each afternoon, I stop by his room on the way to my room to change. I sit in the large wingback chair next to his bed, and he, Kate and I gossip, laugh and often make plans for dinner. Kate drags her school books in and works on her homework while Vince reads or naps.

We have as many family meals together as we can, but James' work schedule often keeps him away at night. Kate has projects and school commitments that keep her occupied, as well. On the nights, Vince cooks occasionally, and he is always willing to pick up dinner when I am too tired to make it.

Vince relishes our family dinners. He has spent many years eating dinner alone, and having his family around the table now fills him with love. I dread the nights the kids are not able to join us. On these evenings, we almost feel like a couple, and I am incredibly uncomfortable. I never imagined I would be sharing nightly dinners with Vince after our divorce. As hard as I try, I cannot keep the memories of our marriage from sneaking into my thoughts.

I remember how I used to spend hours preparing delicious dinners from scratch. If we had salad, I would make my own croutons and salad dressing from recipes. However, the delicious home-cooked meals were never enough to entice Vince home. He preferred to have drinks after work with business associates. The memories of those rejections still hurt.

Kate and I research the type of foods cancer patients should eat. I try to cook meals that are healthy and rich in protein. Individuals with cancer need to consume lots of protein for strength. Esophageal cancer patients should avoid specific foods, especially those containing sugar, which feeds cancer cells. Unfortunately, Vince continues to attempt to eat things he shouldn't. He is angry when he can't complete his meal or has to vomit up food that has gotten stuck in his esophagus. Vince has always worked very hard to be in control of every aspect of his life. Eating what he wants, even though he shouldn't, is his way of not letting the cancer control him. The irony is that the cancer wins out every time. He just hasn't realized it yet.

Vince started chemotherapy in December and will continue to have chemo through the month of January. His hair began to fall out after just the first chemo treatment. He returned from the Christmas holidays almost bald. He looks pale and tired. The poisonous cocktail of drugs takes a toll on him.

Chemo days and the day immediately after are always the best days. The drugs take almost six hours to be pumped into his body. Part of his chemo cocktail includes steroids, which relieve the inflammation and make him feel almost normal. Another benefit of the steroids is that he is able to eat food without choking. On these days we gather as a family and chose a restaurant where Vince can enjoy a food he has been craving.

But then, after chemo, there are five days of excruciating pain that follow. He can barely walk. Every muscle hurts, he feels pain deep inside his bones and he has the chills. He struggles to get food down. The kids and I try to pretend everything is normal, but normalcy is difficult.

On most nights Vince must lean forward in his chair, maximizing the small opening that is left in his esophagus. He must eat very slowly, take small bites and chew his food well. Lentil soup with

risotto, an Italian rice, is one of Vince's favorite meals. I have read that soups are great for esophageal cancer patients, and I know lentils are packed with protein, so one night I make it, hoping it will provide him some energy. Unfortunately, as Vince begins to eat, the risotto lodges in his esophagus. He starts coughing and choking. He jumps up and barely makes it to the sink in time for the soup to explode out of his mouth. We all stop eating and clear the table in silence. Everyone retreats to his or her own space not knowing what to say to Vince.

We are confronted everyday with Vince's cancer and the effects it has on his body. He sleeps until noon each day. He showers and then has a few hours of energy to spend time with the family before he is forced to nap until dinner.

We all try to do what we can to keep Vince comfortable. Kate and I watch TV with him most nights. Vince even watches some of the same television shows Kate likes. She has begun watching a teenage drama on ABC's family channel. It's about four high school girls who are trying to solve the murder of their best friend. I smile when I hear them talking about plot twists and what they think will happen next. Vince even knows the names of all the characters. James works most evenings, and if he is home, he chooses to watch TV in the basement alone.

I am surprised to see how Vince's cancer has made him a celebrity. It's created a "rock-star" effect. Friends, business associates and family members email and call daily. They share their shock and sympathy and they offer to help. Business associates laud his successful career and tell him that his sales leadership will be missed. Vince's cancer has allowed him to reconnect with people in his life that he has not spoken to in years. Sadly, his cancer has become his job. He is on everyone's radar and his ego flourishes. I sit back and watch helplessly as he becomes his cancer.

One afternoon while Kate is busy with friends, I listen to several of these conversations. I watch Vince light up with each compliment. I am surprised when I begin to feel angry. I am mad that he is being applauded for a career that has always meant more to him than his family. I overhear him making plans to visit business friends, many of whom he has not kept in touch with or seen in quite some time. I moved in so he could finally put his children first while he still has time. I am cognizant in that moment that nothing has changed. Faced with death, Vince will spend what time he has left talking and visiting with friends because this feeds his ego. I had hoped that he would want to spend as much time as he could with James and Kate, repairing their relationships. I wish he would focus on his family and soak up the love we provide. But love does not feed his ego.

The kids and I cannot give his ego daily praise, because the reality is that he was a terrible husband and an uninvolved father. He fails to realize that even though the children are distant, they have nothing but love for him in their hearts. Even though we are divorced, I have absolute empathy and compassion for him at this time. But his ego forces him to turn his back on us again as he makes plans to travel to see friends each weekend over the next several months. His focus is on his friends and acquaintances.

Old feelings of abandonment bubble to the surface, and my spirits sink. I am even more troubled to realize that I have not forgotten the past, which means I have yet to forgive. My heart begins to race, and I feel a sharp pain in my chest that takes my breath away. I rub my chest with my hand and attempt to massage the pain away. I try to breathe, but my chest feels tight and heavy. I can't listen to anymore of Vince's end of the phone calls, so I excuse myself. I head to my room to lie down and try to calm my racing heart.

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