

Prologue

It is the soft gentle touch on my knee that arouses me from my entranced state: half asleep and half in a disconnected meditative space. A tingly numbing sensation has set into my fingers and hands. A place I do not want to leave, because then I will start to feel the pain again.

“Momma, they are ready for us,” I hear my daughter say in a slight whisper. I open my eyes and shift to see her solemn stare. I love it when she calls me Momma rather than Mom or Mother, which always has seemed cold to me. It makes me feel like she needs me. I regain my space and remember I am sitting in the lobby of my doctor’s office. I stand, feeling jolts of pain as I move my muscles; they clutch to my bones, which have become frailer as the days go by. I cannot help being distracted; the jolts recall a memory of something similar. As a child growing up in Arizona, I had the misfortune of learning what a jumping cholla was. I try my best to brush off the unsettling memory.

I nod to my daughter, unable to find words, but realizing I do not really feel like speaking. I knew what was coming. I was here only so the doctor can tell my daughter the reality of my situation. If I were to give this news to her, she will cry and want to hug me. That level of emotion or physical closeness with people is not something I am comfortable navigating, let alone my daughter. We are escorted into the doctor's office rather than an exam room, and I cannot help but notice my daughter’s confusion. She is walking ahead of me and pauses slightly in her step, glancing back to make eye contact. I cannot look at her. I keep my eyes fixed on the tan Berber carpet that appears to have been cleaned since my last visit.

My doctor is a successful, established oncologist. He is supposed to be the best of the best in Seattle. He does not take on new patients, but I am the widow of a heart surgeon, and it’s one of my last remaining perks in my old age. Two burgundy red leather wing chairs are positioned in front of a large cherry desk. The leather is always soft but the seat itself is stiff. When you sit in them, you feel like you are sitting before God Almighty, ready for your sentence. In some ways, I suppose many before me have. The wall behind the desk is wallpapered with his distinctive diplomas and medical licenses with a matching cherry credenza along the right wall just below a large pane window that lets in the dull white light from a typical overcast day in the heart of Seattle. Although my doctor’s desk is always cluttered with files of patients, films and lab results, it fascinates me that his cherry credenza is clean and empty except a single bonsai tree

that sits next to a tray of unique rocks with different sizes and colors, smooth and without jagged edges. Sometimes he will accidentally leave his tiny scissors next to the tray, evidence of his delicate care. I settle in my chair and keep my eyes fixated on that bonsai tree, willing it to give me a surge of peace and harmony. In my peripheral vision, I see my daughter staring at me, reading me and waiting for the moment that she can catch my look, and she has reason to speak. The heaviness cloaks us but I cling to my defiant mood. I have no intention of having the conversation with her. Before the doctor walks in, she calmly says, "Ok, Momma, I understand." Our eyes connect and the moment hangs there briefly.

"Good morning, Annabelle. Lizzy, good to see you again," Dr. Tolliver says. He is not wearing his typical white jacket over his suit. His blue and white pin stripe shirt is tucked into blue trousers and accented by a deep maroon tie. I notice the tie is held in place by a gold pin with a unique engraving. I can't decipher it but immediately feel there is a nostalgic connection. A meaning that is known only to him and the person who gave it to him. He sits down at his desk and casually opens a file that is obviously mine. I notice a slight smudge on the right lens of his gold rimmed glasses. Probably from picking up his glasses right after slicking back his thick gray hair with gel this morning. He scans the page and suddenly grasps his hands in front of him and looks up sternly. I begin to squirm from an ache that has settled into my left hip.

"Well, Annabelle, we got your test results back. I am sorry to tell you that it's not great news. It appears the cancer is no longer in remission. It has returned and it has spread. We could always do another regime of chemo but at your age and how hard it was for you last time... Well, it's up to you, like we talked about last week." I look at my doctor in silence. In reality, I had known this was coming. I am a psychic after all. I had begun to have visions of loved ones that had gone before me. My husband had come to me just the night before in my dream. Frankly, I am tired and have already come to peace with knowing what the upcoming months are going to bring. Dr. Tolliver looks over at my daughter.

"Lizzy, do you have any questions?" I see her try to suppress tears that are welling up. We are looking at each other. Her eyes have a hurt, betrayed look. I can't tell if she feels I have betrayed her or life itself.

"How long has this been going on?" *Aah, there it is!* The tone bites me like a mosquito. She looks between me and my doctor. I catch my doctor's eye but immediately cower. I stare at that Berber carpet again. Dr. Tolliver senses the situation he is confronted with, casually takes the

lead, giving me reprieve.

“Well, Lizzy, your mother had mentioned she was more tired than usual the last few months. She wasn’t able to shake off a simple cold as quickly. She was feeling achy, more than usual. So she came to me a few weeks ago, and we started with bloodwork. Over the last few weeks, we finally got her in for more scans.” My daughter glances over at me. I finally accept connecting and hold onto the glance between us. Without taking my eyes off her, I find the words to ask.

“How long do I have?” I watch as my daughter takes a quick breath. I hold onto her gaze with strength and resolve as I hear Dr. Tolliver answer.

“Four to six months. At this point, there are things we can do to keep you comfortable.”