

# 1



BY THE TIME WE PULLED UP TO THE ENTRANCE OF THE HOSPITAL THAT Tuesday in May 1982, the afternoon sky was nearly as dark as midnight. The wind whipped the trees into a near frenzy, and the rain came down in sheets, as thunder rolled and lightning zigzagged across the heavens. Despite my forced optimistic demeanor, the weather matched my mood, and I was having a hard time maintaining my usual sunny disposition.

Of course, I really had no choice. I wasn't about to let my mother or my one-year-old daughter—or anyone else, for that matter—know how absolutely terrified I felt as I climbed out of the car and turned back to say goodbye. Instead I smiled wide and, in my typical upbeat manner, said to my mom, “I can go in by myself. Ya’ll don’t need to get out in this rain.” Then I turned my attention to my daughter, who sat in the back seat.

“I love you, Colleybug,” I said, using the nickname we’d attached to her because she was so tiny. “I’ll see you in a few days.” I leaned in to kiss her goodbye, struggling against the tears that rose up at the thought of how much I already missed her.

“Thanks for everything, Mom,” I said, my confident smile still in place. “I’ll call you later. Oh, and don’t forget to pick up Elliott from the birthday party.”

As I watched the yellow Camaro pull out of sight, I tried to ignore the growing sense of loneliness that threatened to overwhelm me. *No*, I thought. *I can't let this get the best of me.* I turned and pushed my way through the rotating doors and walked across the lobby to the admissions desk. I would never be the same again.

After smiling through the admissions process and various scheduled tests, I was encouraged when the nurse on duty took me to a brand new, sparkling clean room. I climbed onto the bed, propped myself up on the pillows, and, still in my clothes, gazed out the window at the Birmingham skyline, hidden now by a bleak, black blanket of clouds. The May thunderstorm that seemingly obliterated the heavens was nothing compared to the storm of emotion that was about to break loose inside me.

Now that I was by myself, I sat, entranced, listening to the slapping sound of the raindrops like tiny pebbles hitting the window pane. A sick feeling ran through my stomach as I finally let my defenses down, and a deep sense of sadness washed over me.

I'd been playing games for a year. I wanted to believe the doctors when they told me nothing was wrong. But I knew there was. Now the game-playing was over, and it was time to face reality. I sat on the bed and pent-up tears rolled down my face.

Two hours lapsed, as I waited, staring out the window, alone at last with my fears. Then my husband, Lee, arrived. I was glad Dr. Goldfarb, one of my surgeons, didn't make his rounds until after Lee was there. The two of us were watching television when Dr. Goldfarb came in—or at least, Lee was. I stared in the TV's general direction, but nothing was registering.

"Hello," the doctor said, walking into the room and holding out his hand to Lee. "I'm Mort Goldfarb."

"You don't look very cheerful," I said, watching the two men shake hands and trying to keep my tone light, even though somewhere deep inside I already knew why Dr. Goldfarb wasn't smiling. "Have you had a bad day?"

He turned to me, his words as somber as the expression on his face. “After looking over your tomogram, it looks like the growth is larger than we thought.”

His words sliced through my chest and into my heart. I’d been right in thinking something was wrong, though I hadn’t wanted to be. The doctors’ previous assurances that it was just a pea-sized growth that needed to come out faded to the back of my mind. Still, I did my best to ignore the implications of his statement by quickly responding, “So you just take out a larger growth.”

He began to explain to me about a tumor “the size of a golf ball in your sinus cavity,” but I cut him off.

“What’s the bottom line?” I asked. “What’s the worst that could happen to me?”

Without hesitation, he looked me in the eyes and replied, “You could lose the right side of your face.”

Stunned, I asked the question that no one ever wants to ask: “Why? It couldn’t be cancer, could it?”

Compassionately, yet again without hesitation, he answered, “Yes, Candy, it could. But remember, you asked for the worst. Let’s just hope for the best.”



My greatest fears, those I’d tried to bury for so long, were finally beginning to surface. And there was nothing I could do about it.

I felt crazy and confused. The melodramatic part of me (which, by nature, is huge!) thought, *This is dramatic!* But the part of me that had been hidden in denial for so long quickly gave way to the reality of what I’d just heard, while another part of me was glad there really was something wrong. I wanted to prove to anyone who’d doubted me that I wasn’t making up the way I’d felt for a year, and that I wasn’t just some hypochondriac. I wanted to say, “See, I told you so”—especially to Lee. I wanted him to feel badly

that he didn't believe me and got mad at me for not feeling well, and for making me go places and do things I didn't feel like doing.

For months, I'd chosen to believe that I or someone else could fix things. I was an only child, and I'd always been able to use the art of persuasion or stubborn persistence to get what I wanted or needed. Quite obviously, that wasn't going to work this time.

I decided to call my parents, as well as two of the ministers of our large Presbyterian church, and they all agreed to come right away. Then I called our doctor and friend Doug Tilt, who'd run tests on me the previous week. Within an hour, they were all assembled in my room, doing their best to cheer and encourage me.

"Candy, you don't know what it is yet."

"Try not to worry."

"Try to be optimistic."

"They said it *could* be cancer, but you don't know that for sure."

I fixed my eyes on Doug and asked, "You're positive all my tests were all right last week?"

Carefully guarding his words he answered, "Candy, the tests we took were all right." The words he didn't say echoed as loudly in my mind as the ones he did.

Felix, one of our pastors, suggested we pray. We all agreed, though I don't remember what was said, and to be honest, praying didn't seem to help either. The truth was, I wanted an instant solution, and nobody had one.

Lee and I were from church-going families. We were financially secure, and I was able to stay at home to raise our two healthy children, just like my momma had for me. Suddenly, I realized all that security could change in a moment.

*What about Elliott and Colley? They're only five and one! What if I die? What if I can't raise my children? Colley won't even remember me. She won't remember asking me at bedtime to "Rock a baby."* Tears stung my eyes as I thought of how she sucked her thumb and held her little pink blanket

while I rocked her to sleep. *Who will rock her to sleep if I die? Will Elliott remember that each night I read nursery rhymes to him?*

I spent a sleepless night waiting for the surgery that was scheduled for seven-thirty Wednesday morning. Dr. Poynor and Dr. Goldfarb would be performing what was described as a simple procedure, which amounted to cutting across the top of the teeth under the lip on the right side and removing the tumor from the sinus area. By the time I was wheeled into surgery that morning, I was starving for words of hope and reassurance.

Dr. Goldfarb was the last person I saw before I was put to sleep. Mary, his nurse, held my hand, as the doctor stood beside the operating table. Pleading with my eyes as well as my words, I looked at him and, as if I could change the circumstances by begging, said, “Dr. Goldfarb, what do you think?”

In an obvious attempt to encourage me, he repeated his words from the night before: “Let’s just hope for the best.” But his half-smile and the concern in his deep brown eyes gave him away.

Before either of us could say anything more, I heard the anesthesiologist’s voice. “Candy, count to ten.”

Obediently, I responded. “One, two, three, four...” And I was asleep.

When I awoke, I looked up to see a nurse wheeling me on a gurney back to my room. I opened my mouth and voiced the first thought that popped into my mind: “Did they get the tumor?”

“Your doctor will talk to you about that later.”

I’d seen enough television to know what that meant—and it wasn’t good.

Back in my room, I soon heard Dr. Goldfarb’s voice, penetrating the lingering haze of my anesthesia.

“The mass was larger than we’d anticipated. We didn’t try to remove it; we just took a small section to biopsy. The frozen section has the correct characteristics of being malignant, but the pathologists aren’t sure.” Then he apologized for not knowing more.

I heard Lee ask, “When will they know?”

“Possibly tonight, but probably tomorrow.”

I drifted back into my haze and dozed some more—until the pain woke me up. The anesthetic was wearing off, and the floor I was on, though shiny, clean, and new, was understaffed. No one answered my calls when Momma or I pressed the button. Escalating stabs of pain pierced my face, and my tongue felt thick with thirst. Momma finally went to the desk, insisting someone bring me a pain shot and some water.

Later that afternoon my face began to swell. Momma pressed my call button and asked if an icepack would help.

“We’ll need to check her chart to see if her doctor has authorized one,” the nurse replied over the intercom.

The nurse never came, and Momma called again.

“I’m sorry,” was the reply. “We can’t find her chart, and we can’t do anything without her chart.”

By the time the fugitive chart was located, my face was too swollen for ice to do any good, though pain medicine helped a little.

When Dr. Poynor made his rounds that evening, he and Daddy went out into the hall to talk privately. The doctor explained that there was some confusion about the biopsy report, and we’d have to wait awhile longer before receiving it.

Daddy didn’t take that news very well. He naturally wanted to protect me, as he had when I was a child, but he was helpless to fix this situation. All he could do was pace back and forth at the end of my bed.

Momma, on the other hand, continued to be optimistic—at least, she acted like it. When Daddy slept in the waiting room down the hall and Lee went home to spend the night, Momma and I had some quiet time, which I really needed. Many nights when I was growing up, she’d sat at the end of my bed, listening to me think things out, and it was natural for us to fall back into that pattern at such a critical time in my life.

As I lay there that Wednesday night, I silently prayed and begged God to hurry things up, to let me know the biopsy results, whatever they were. But deep inside I already knew.

“Momma,” I said, as the truth of what lay ahead permeated my thoughts in a way I didn’t understand and couldn’t explain, “I’m going to go through something so horrible that people won’t believe it, but it’s going to be okay in the end. I’m not going to die.” Though a dramatic statement, I spoke it somberly, but also with assurance. I wouldn’t have used the word *prophetic* at the time, but that was the tone of my pronouncement.

My mother appeared puzzled, examining my face as if to see how I could seem so sure of what I’d said. “How do you know that, Candy?”

I shrugged. “I just know.” I couldn’t explain it because I’d never experienced that kind of feeling. It didn’t bring fear with it—though maybe some dread—but it was as if the Lord chose to give me some knowledge of what lay ahead, as well as some assurance and relief at the same time.

“I wanted to say it out loud,” I told Momma, “so when it happens, people will know I didn’t make it up.”

For my mother, that statement immediately took root and sustained her through the months ahead. I, on the other hand, drifted off to sleep, wondering how I could feel so sure about such a thing.