

Chapter 1

An Unexpected Call

Dark, ominous clouds filled the gloomy New England sky. Although spring was only a few days away, it appeared that old man winter intended to torment us for a while longer.

I sat in my recliner in the living room, reading the evening paper. The smell of cumin, chili and other pungent spices streamed from the kitchen where my wife, Berta, labored over a Mexican feast of tacos, tostadas, Spanish rice and refried beans.

I had recently returned to work after a month long battle with pneumonia and I still felt a bit run down. I closed my newspaper, settled back in my chair, and started to doze off.

Our twelve year old daughter, Kelly, toiled over her homework in the dining room while Erinn, our middle child, napped upstairs in her bedroom.

Erinn had made a remarkable transition when her older brother, Chris, left home for his freshman year at Allegheny College in Northwestern Pennsylvania. She grew more responsible and devoted much more time to her studies. She had recently completed a rigorous freshman field hockey season and immediately launched herself into a demanding spring track program.

Erinn had complained of feeling unusually tired for the past few days. She survived on a typical, teenage diet of pizza and fast food and maintained an extremely hectic schedule, so a little fatigue didn't seem out of the ordinary.

Berta thought it would be wise to take Erinn to the doctor for some routine blood work. Mononucleosis surfaced at the high school on occasion, and with Erinn's poor eating habits and frantic daily routine, anemia was also a possibility.

The doctor told Berta the lab would contact her with the test results within a couple of days. We laughed. The lab never calls.

I rested quietly in my recliner. The shrill ring of the telephone shook me from my slumber as I fumbled for the phone on the end table next to my chair. "Hello," I mumbled.

"Hi. Mr. Havey?" the caller inquired.

"Speaking," I said.

"Hi. It's Dr. Pleasants calling. Am I interrupting anything?"

"Not at all," I said. "What's up?" I eased forward in my recliner.

"I have Erinn's lab work back," he said, "and...", he paused briefly.

"There's something curious going on in Erinn's blood," he continued.

I fell back into my chair. "What do you mean?" I asked.

"Some of her blood cells look a little unusual," Dr. Pleasants said. "I'm not sure what's going on but..."

"What do you think it is?" I interrupted.

"I can't say for sure," he said "and without running some more extensive tests I can't be certain, but..." He hesitated for a moment.

I waited in silent anticipation.

Dr. Pleasants cleared his throat. "...there's a possibility this could be leukemia," he said.

I slumped down in my chair.

"Can you get to Rhode Island Hospital first thing tomorrow morning?"

"Leukemia?" I asked.

"We need to do some more tests," he said. "I'll make the necessary arrangements. You should probably plan to spend two or three days there. "Can you be there by nine thirty tomorrow?"

I rose slowly from my chair. The newspaper I had been reading dropped to the floor. "Yeah, we'll be there," I said. "But are you sure....."

Dr. Pleasants interrupted.

"Don't worry Mr. Havey," he said. "I'll talk to you tomorrow."

My heart pounded. I stood silently, staring out the window into the night.

"Are you okay? Dr. Pleasants asked.

"I'm okay...thanks." I said. I hung up the phone and glanced toward the kitchen where Berta stood in the doorway. She looked concerned.

"Who was that?" she asked.

"It was Dr. Pleasants," I said.

Berta bolted across the room and sat on the arm of my chair.

"What's wrong!" she asked.

I fell back into my chair and buried my head in my hands.

"Bob, what's wrong?" she insisted.

I sprang from my chair and bolted down the stairs to my office and collapsed into the chair behind my desk.

Berta ran down the stairs behind me. "What did Dr. Pleasants tell you?" she insisted. "What did he say?"

"Everything will be okay," I said. "Erin needs to have some more tests done, that's all. She'll be fine." A solitary tear escaped the corner of my eye.

"What else did he say?" Berta pleaded.

I drew a deep breath. "There are some abnormalities in her blood," I said. "Dr. Pleasants said..."

"What?" Berta interrupted. "What did he say?"

I choked back tears as I got up from my chair and walked across the room to where Berta was standing. I put my arms around her.

"It might be leukemia," I said. Tears welled up in Berta's eyes.

"She'll be okay, Bert," I sobbed. "She'll be okay."

We stood there for some time holding one another, crying. Berta leaned on the edge of my desk. "What are we going to tell Erinn?" she asked.

We had to tell Erinn. I had almost forgotten. I wanted to forget. "I don't know," I said, "I don't know. I'll think of something." I put my arms around Berta and kissed her on the cheek. "Don't worry. She'll be fine," I said.

Berta wiped the tears from her face. "Are you okay?" I asked. She nodded.

Berta and I talked a while before I stumbled up the stairs to the dining room where Kelly sat, laboring intently over her

homework. I slithered quietly past her and slowly climbed the staircase to Erinn's room. I knocked on her door.

"Come on in," she said.

I gently pushed the door open and popped my head in. Erinn was lying in bed, reading a magazine.

"Hi, dad," she said. She sat up slowly. She looked exhausted.

"Hi, honey. How are you feeling?" I asked.

"Kinda tired," she answered.

"I just talked to Dr. Pleasants," I said. "He wants you to get some more tests done. We have to go to Rhode Island Hospital in the morning."

"I have to go to the hospital?" she whimpered.

"We might be there for a couple of days," I said.

Her magazine fell to the floor. "A couple of days!"

I sat on the edge of her bed and placed my hand gently on her shoulder to comfort her. She pulled away from me.

"Why do I have to stay there?" she demanded.

"Dr. Pleasants will explain everything to us tomorrow, honey, don't worry," I said.

I picked up the magazine and set it on Erinn's night stand. "Do you want to come downstairs for a while?" I asked.

"No!" she said determinedly.

"Okay," I said. "Mom will be up in a few minutes." I kissed her on the forehead and pulled the blankets up around her shoulders.

Her skin was cold.

She looked pale.

I slipped quietly out of the room and sauntered down the stairs to the living room where Berta and Kelly sat together on the couch. Kelly looked worried. I sat next to her and mustered up all the strength I had. "Erinn has to go to the hospital for a few days for some tests," I said.

"Why?" Kelly asked.

"They need to do some blood tests that they can't do at the clinic, that's all," I answered. "Do you want to go with us?"

"I don't think so," Kelly responded. She seemed content with my explanation and went back to her homework.

None of us ate dinner that evening.

That night seemed to last forever. I tossed and turned in my bed, drifting in and out of consciousness. I finally fell asleep out of sheer exhaustion.

Berta slept very little.

We awoke to a thin covering of new-fallen snow. We began our journey to Rhode Island Hospital at about eight thirty. The hospital was in Providence, Rhode Island, about a thirty minute drive from our home in Massachusetts. I got off Route 95 at the wrong exit and Berta and Erinn enjoyed a good laugh at my expense. It was good to hear them laugh. I pulled into a gas station, asked directions and jumped back onto the highway. We drove for another five minutes and exited the highway directly in front of an enormous complex of medical buildings. We drove around for several more minutes before I located the admissions building. I pulled in to the main parking lot.

We located the admissions office and signed in. After a short wait, we were summoned in to a small cubicle where we answered an incessant barrage of questions. An older gentleman in a blue uniform entered the office as we completed our admissions interview. He helped Erinn into a wheelchair and told her to stay put until we reached her room on Potter I, the teen floor of the pediatric wing of the hospital. Erinn refused to stay in the wheelchair. She was adamant. The attendant insisted. Erinn submitted. She was not happy.

We left the admissions office and traveled through an enormous maze of tunnels connecting all the buildings in the complex. Erinn appeared annoyed by the entire matter. She seemed a bit anxious.

We arrived at the end of the maze, climbed into an elevator, and rode up one level. As the elevator door opened, our attendant announced, in a rather boisterous voice, "Potter I."

Erinn flashed me her infamous "give me a break" look. I laughed as we exited the elevator. The overwhelming odor of disinfectant and alcohol permeated the air. I felt nauseous. I hated hospitals.

A nurse greeted us and ushered us to a drab, sterile looking room located at the far end of a long, narrow hallway. The room was divided into three sections by dreary, wrinkled, gray curtains. We were directed to the first bed inside the doorway and told that the doctor would be with us soon. We waited for what seemed like an eternity, taking in the many sights and sounds of the hospital.

About an hour and a half later, the door to Erinn's room flew open. A gray-haired man in a long, white lab coat rushed in. He

appeared a bit flustered. He extended his hand to me. "Hi, I'm Dr. Forman," he said.

"Hi. Bob Havey," I replied, "and this is my wife, Berta."

Dr. Forman smiled and shook Berta's hand. "Nice to meet you," he said.

Berta nodded. "Hi," she replied.

Erinn slid forward from where she sat on the edge of her bed. Dr. Forman glanced over at her. "And you must be Erinn," he said. He smiled and shut the door.

"Mr. and Mrs. Havey", He said, nodding in our direction, "please have a seat."

We chatted for a short time before getting down to business. Dr. Forman laid out Erinn's schedule for the next few days. The agenda included a spinal tap, which entailed puncturing the base of the spine with a needle and drawing out some spinal fluid, and a bone marrow biopsy, during which a small amount of bone marrow is removed from the hip area. Both were slated for the following afternoon. Erinn appeared quite relaxed and cheerful during Dr. Forman's visit. I wondered if she understood the seriousness of her situation.

Dr. Forman fielded a few questions, kissed Erinn on top of the head, and slipped out the door. He had a wonderful, grandfather-like bedside manner and an obvious, genuine love for children. He explained everything thoroughly, in simple, layman's terms, and was especially attentive to Erinn. Erinn seemed very much at ease with him.

I liked this man.

Later in the day, several oncology residents stopped by to examine Erinn. Each of them asked her the same questions. Erinn appeared thoroughly annoyed by it all.

That evening I walked the halls alone. In the last twenty four hours our lives had been turned upside down. Erinn now faced the greatest challenge of her young life. It made no sense.

I sauntered back to Erinn's room, wiping tears from my eyes.

Early the next morning, the resident scheduled to perform Erinn's spinal tap and bone marrow biopsy dropped in to introduce herself. She was a young, attractive, extremely soft-spoken black woman. I wondered how someone so young and unassuming could possibly perform this delicate surgery. We spoke for several minutes before she excused herself to prepare for Erinn's procedures.

A nurse pushing a wheelchair appeared at the door. "All set to go, Erinn?" she asked cheerfully.

Erinn slid off the bed. "I guess so," she replied.

I kissed Erinn on the cheek. "Everything will be fine." I said.

Berta hugged her. "I love you," she said.

Erin smiled.

The nurse wheeled Erinn down the hallway to the procedure room. An hour passed. I was a nervous wreck. Berta and I paced the hall outside Erinn's room. Finally, a nurse pushing a gurney appeared at the far end of the hall. Erinn's doctor followed behind. We hurried down to meet them.

"She did great," the doctor said. "She'll probably sleep for a while. I'll be back later to check up on her."

We walked back down the hall to Erinn's room. I helped the nurse slide her onto her bed. She was fast asleep. She looked so peaceful. I wished I could take her place. I wanted to protect her from everything bad in the world, but for the first time in my life, I understood that I couldn't. I brushed back a tear.

Several hours passed before Erinn opened her eyes. She was a bit groggy from the anesthesia. "Hi, Erinn," Berta said. "How do you feel?"

Erinn mumbled something about having a headache and drifted back into a deep sleep. I slipped into the chair next to her bed and closed my eyes. Berta brushed Erinn's hair back and kissed her on the forehead.

We expected to meet with Dr. Forman by six o'clock that evening to discuss Erinn's test results. I checked my watch. It was almost seven. I peered down the vast expanse of corridor leading to the east wing of the hospital where Dr. Forman's office was located. He was nowhere in sight.