

BOOK CLUB SYNOPSIS

You've Been Chosen: Thriving Through the Unexpected

Cynt Marshall

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INTRODUCTION

Your Voice Of Power

Cynt Marshall had been at AT&T for nearly 30 years and was president of AT&T North Carolina when she received a phone call from her doctor telling her that a recent scan showed that she had an advanced form of cancer. She was told that without chemotherapy, she had a 25% chance of survival at best.

When she called her mother to tell her the news, her mother told her that God had a plan for her. “She said that because I had a high-profile job, and because so many people knew me, my cancer journey would live itself out in the public eye, and people would benefit from watching my faith in action as I faced and beat it.”

Reflecting on why she says she was “chosen” to have cancer, Marshall notes that she has “been blessed with many opportunities to serve others by being a ‘first.’” Her firsts include being the first Black senior class president of her high school, the first Black sorority sister in her chapter, and now the first Black woman to be CEO of an NBA team. She has faced her share of adversity, but she ultimately believes that all of her experiences have put her on her path to serve others.

The book outlines her experience navigating her cancer diagnosis and treatment, how she lived through it, and how each of her experiences has prepared her for the one following. Even though many of the challenges she has faced have been painful, it is precisely these painful events that led her places she wouldn’t otherwise have gone.

CHAPTER ONE

Pay Attention

Following consistent badgering from a colleague, Marshall relented and scheduled a long-postponed colonoscopy. The doctor quickly noticed something wrong in the result—but it wasn't the first indication that something was off with Marshall's health.

A few days later, Marshall met with a surgeon who believed that the tumor was not cancerous and suggested there was no rush to get the surgery to remove it. Marshall felt otherwise. While she hadn't been "born with a voice of power," she had developed the skills to trust her instincts and speak up when she felt it was necessary. She told the doctor that 30 years of "leading teams all up and down the corporate ladder had taught [her] the only way to get things done is to act, and to act fast."

The doctor and his team needed coaxing, but within a couple of hours, they scheduled her surgery for the following week.

CHAPTER TWO

It's Not Where You Live, But How You Live

Marshall outlines key parts of her history and the way she was raised to explain who she is today. One of the most important parts of her upbringing is her faith: She was raised attending church weekly. Even though her family didn't have much growing up, Marshall notes, "We had God, and we had one another. Our mother showed us that with those two things, we could handle anything that came along."

Whereas Marshall's mother instilled faith, discipline, and hard work in her children, Marshall's father was violent and prone to angry outbursts. He abused his wife and his children. Her mother worked multiple jobs to feed the family, gave her children structure, and gave them educational, physical, and spiritual goals. "Above everything else, my mother taught us to pray. We talked to the Lord about everything, all the time." This upbringing led to Marshall's own commitment to God.

CHAPTER THREE

Be Prepared

Not long after Marshall's tumor was removed, she turned her attention back to her personal life and work. A few days later, her surgeon called with the results of the pathology report: Her tumor was malignant, and the cancer was not just in her colon, but also in her lymph nodes and blood vessels. The surgeon gave her a recommendation for an oncologist, and she immediately made an appointment to begin her treatment process.

CHAPTER FOUR

Get Your Education

When Marshall was 11, she found herself in the middle of an altercation between her father and another man, both of whom were armed. This was only one of many instances of violence during her childhood—including several initiated by her father.

Despite frequent, unpredictable outbursts by Marshall's father, Marshall's mother prioritized structure and routine in the lives of Marshall and her siblings. "Education and faith were our paths out of the projects." Marshall loved school: She felt safe and welcome, and she loved having the opportunity to achieve.

She remained dedicated to school, not letting any of the awful things that happened to her stop her from attending. "Life is not necessarily about what happens to us but about how we respond."

CHAPTER FIVE

Make A Plan

Telling her children about her cancer diagnosis wasn't easy for Marshall, but she knew she couldn't put it off. When she told them, she had the pastor come over to pray with them. Then she shared the news with other trusted friends, who came over and supported her, including her four closest friends whom she calls the "posse."

Once Marshall had enough time to process the news, she focused on learning as much as she could about her cancer. She did research, made a plan, and then outlined how she would implement it. She knew that several elements of her life would need to change but that she would adapt as needed. Most importantly, she set an intention: She would focus on the "'CAN' in cancer."

"All I can say is that my history, and a lifetime of personal experiences, had prepared me. Time after time, I saw that when people like my mother were down, they could dig deep, hold fast to hope, focus on solutions, shout out for help, and *then get up*."

The last group Marshall knew she would need to tell was the media; her position at AT&T meant that she was always in the public eye, and her personal life and health could easily become a story about how the company was being led.

When Marshall met with her oncologist, he explained that she had stage 3 invasive cancer and a lesion on her liver. He recommended chemotherapy, noting that if she didn't seek treatment, she would likely die.

CHAPTER SIX

Searching For Peace

Fed up with the years of ongoing abuse, Marshall's mother secretly filed for divorce from Marshall's father in 1975. When he found out, he burst into a violent rage worse than they'd previously experienced. Someone in her family called the police, and her father threatened to kill them all, continuing with this threat in the months that followed. Her father faced no legal repercussions for this—nor for his subsequent violent actions.

Marshall cut ties with her father when she was an adult and did not have a relationship with him throughout the rest of his life. His behavior, however, has influenced the way she lives her life. She doesn't drink or smoke, and she doesn't allow anyone to raise their voice to her.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Take Friends On The Road

(Round 1)

Marshall had a lot of support from friends and family as she went through her cancer treatment. Her husband accompanied her to early appointments, and her mother and brother flew in at the beginning for extra support.

When Marshall started chemotherapy, her friends and husband fought over who would accompany her to her treatments. The “posse” brought her to her first treatment, and they also stepped up in other ways, including helping her post updates for friends and family on her online chemo journal, feeding her family, and taking her children to their extracurricular activities.

Marshall always knew how important it was to ask for help, but going through chemo reminded her. “[T]here’s never been anything in my life quite like chemo to show me the true power of opening up and accepting help that’s joyfully offered.”

CHAPTER EIGHT

Avoid Distractions

Marshall met Kenny, the man who would become her husband, when she was 15. They were at a regional competition for DECA, the Distributive Education Clubs of America. While nothing happened between them at the time, he wrote her letters over the months that followed, and they developed a friendship.

She later graduated high school with a scholarship to the University of California, Berkeley, and planned to continue to pursue her three main goals: get an education, land a good job, and help get her mother out of the projects. She was dedicated to this plan and would not be distracted, so when Kenny said that he planned to transfer to a college nearby to be closer to her, she told him that she would call him when she graduated.

When Marshall's graduation day arrived, she made good on her promise to call Kenny. She told him to come to the graduation party her mother planned, and she also told him about the numerous job offers she received following her graduating with top grades. What Marshall didn't expect was for Kenny to tell her that he was already engaged to someone else.

Kenny showed up a few hours later to her graduation party, no longer engaged. They were married two years later. While Marshall stands by her "no distractions" plan, she notes that she's lucky it didn't impact her relationship with Kenny in the long run.

CHAPTER NINE

Appreciate The Journey

(Round 2)

Marshall did not anticipate how physically painful and debilitating chemotherapy would be. A colleague who had recently been through his own cancer diagnosis and treatment warned her that she would experience incredible fatigue. “He said he knew I thought I was Superwoman, but I wasn’t going to be able to push through it, so I should put myself to bed and wait it out.”

Marshall only halfway listened to her colleague’s advice; she wanted to see her projects through at work, and intended to get as much done as possible on her “good” days. Her boss had other plans for her, telling her that she had to prioritize her treatment and get accustomed to creating a new routine for herself. Another colleague stepped in to serve as backup for Marshall on the days when she wasn’t able to work.

But Marshall also hadn’t realized how much the change to her life and routine would impact her children. She became aware of how her own routine provided stability for them, so she tried to continue to mimic it, leaving her work outfit hanging on the closet door as she previously had, even on days when she didn’t manage to get dressed.

CHAPTER TEN

Serving Others

Marshall and her family didn't have much when she was growing up, but her mother instilled in them a dedication to service. "[H]owever poor we were, or however troubled things might be at home, we had a responsibility to what [Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.] called 'vigorous and positive action.'" This dedication to service is what drew Marshall to Delta Gamma, the sorority she joined in college. The sorority's motto is "to 'do good.'"

Service also played a role in Marshall's career plans post-college. She wanted to maximize her earnings potential, but she also wanted to serve others. Pacific Telephone and Telegraph gave her the best offer, and she joined the company following graduation. Even though the money was good, Marshall faced significant discrimination in her role. One boss belittled her clothing and told her to remove her braids, calling her look "too 'ethnic.'"

Throughout Marshall's career, she has developed the belief that "to be a good leader, I need to spend at least half of my working hours investing in the people around me: listening, learning, and loving them." This applies to her corporate work, as well: Marshall's goal is to improve the lives of those with whom she works. She aims to "make work life better for the greatest number of employees possible and to enable their nonwork life by making sure they can feed their kids ... and do whatever they need to do." She takes this dedication seriously, working long hours and doing whatever it takes to do her job right and help others.

Marshall excelled at the telephone company and was promoted over time from supervisor through a number of roles all the way to her position as president of AT&T North Carolina, which she held at the time of her cancer diagnosis.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Take Nothing For Granted

(Round 3)

Chemo was physically challenging, but Marshall appreciated that time because she knew that was when she was “fighting back.” Her life began to follow a new cycle: She had nine bad days, followed by five good ones. During the good days, she would socialize and do some work. On the bad days, Marshall was largely confined to bed, due to severe pain, weakness, and nausea.

Even when she wasn’t literally in the chemo chair hooked up to the large pump, she had to carry around a small, portable pump for another 48 hours. Believing that this small pump was what would help her “get her groove back,” Marshall named the portable pump Winston after Taye Diggs’ character in *How Stella Got Her Groove Back*.

“Cancer was sucking up a lot of my spark and my groove, and Winston was my answer to getting my life back. I showed my chemo pump some love so that he would show me some love in return.”

It took her time to get accustomed to the ups and downs and the fact that she wouldn’t be able to stick to her old routine, but, eventually, Marshall learned to embrace it.

CHAPTER TWELVE

When Life Doesn't Follow The Plan

Marshall likes a plan, and she thought her plan to start a family would be like all the rest: She would set her mind to it and make it happen. But, in the first few years of her marriage to Kenny, Marshall got pregnant a few times, and each time she miscarried at around 16 weeks.

“Underneath all of that, of course, was the uncomfortable truth that I wasn’t yet ready to wrestle with: my miscarriage was the first time that I’d made a major plan that had totally fallen apart. It was the first time in a long time that something so important was so out of my control.”

The fourth miscarriage nearly killed her, so her husband tried to convince her to stop trying to get pregnant. They waited three years and then agreed to try one last time.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Make A Grand Entrance

(Round 4)

Marshall brought her love of fashion to the cancer center for each of her treatments. She wanted to spruce up not just the way she looked when she was receiving treatment, but the room itself. The room was drab and quiet, and the other patients tended to keep to themselves.

During her fourth session, Marshall decided to take charge. She decorated the room along a “March Madness” theme and brought jerseys and banners for the other patients and staff. She brought in food and organized activities for everyone to engage in together.

“Chemo Day had become Party Day. ... I knew chemo was serious business. ... But I was convinced it didn’t have to be *somber* business.” This became a recurring event throughout Marshall’s treatment, decorating the center and creating “party days.” Her goal was to remind herself and the other patients that they were alive.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Letting Go

When Marshall became pregnant for the fifth time, she finally made it past the 16-week mark. She and her husband allowed themselves to decorate a nursery, but then suddenly at 20 weeks, she went into premature labor. Marshall gave birth to a baby girl, who was so small and underdeveloped that she had to stay in the neonatal intensive care unit (NICU) for several months.

Not long after her daughter had a surgery that was supposed to treat her condition, and a week before she was due to be sent home, her daughter died. Marshall notes that the pain and grief were unmatched, but she believes that her daughter's life—and death—"were part of the bigger plan."

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Adjust The Pain Points

(Round 5)

One of the drugs in the chemo cocktail Marshall received is called Oxaliplatin, which she nicknamed “the Mean O.” When Marshall was feeling particularly bad after a treatment round, “the Mean O” was the culprit.

Because of the way Marshall’s body was reacting to it, her doctor wanted to remove it from a few of her treatments. But Marshall wasn’t having it, “thinking that anything that was this hard on [her] must be hard on the cancer cells, too.” He explained to her that it wasn’t necessary in every round and that skipping it a few times could be beneficial, as it would help her get her strength back.

When Marshall found this out, she was more on board with skipping it, but she thought she would be able to dictate which weeks he removed it from the cocktail. She wanted to time it around work or family needs, but that’s not the way it worked.

On one of Marshall’s good days after “the Mean O” was removed, she felt reasonably energetic and decided to go to the office. To her disappointment, her colleagues weren’t excited to see her; instead, her boss called and told her to go home. The reaction hurt Marshall. Not only did she expect a different reception, but she also struggled to accept the fact that she couldn’t maintain the same pace she had before starting treatment. Over time, she understood, “It was okay for me to rest my mind for a few weeks to give my body time to catch up. It didn’t mean I was giving up.”

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Stay Open

Marshall and her husband processed the grief of losing their baby in different ways. Kenny decided to set his sights on the idea of adoption. Not long after he began exploring the option, he found a boy whom the two of them quickly proceeded to adopt.

“What was clear was that my plan was never *the* plan. The Lord knew how our family was being made that year, and it was a story more beautiful than anything I could imagine.”

The boy Marshall and her husband adopted, Anthony, had been abandoned alongside his nine-year-old brother when he was just nine months old. He and his brother were separated, and as an infant, Anthony was neglected and abused in a series of foster homes before he was adopted.

Anthony experienced significant trauma as a result of the difficult first years of his life, which was a challenge for Marshall and Kenny to navigate. In particular, Anthony was fearful that social workers would take him from them in the same way they had moved him from foster home to foster home. It took some time for the couple to convince Anthony that he would be with them forever.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Celebrate Halftime

(Round 6)

After each round of chemo, Marshall got weaker, and her lab results worsened. Her doctor wanted to pause her treatment to give her time to rebuild—but Marshall wouldn't have any of it. She had planned her life around her final round being scheduled for June and did not want to slow it down.

While she didn't let Kenny convince her to postpone her treatments, Marshall knew how hard all of this was on him. "It's hard being sick, but I think sometimes it's even harder watching the person you love being sick." Marshall adds that she is traditionally the optimist in the relationship, and Kenny is the pessimist. The cancer hit him particularly hard, as it "threatened what he held most dear."

Believe In Miracles

When Marshall first met her oncologist, she told him that she had decided that she would live. Surviving cancer would be her way to encourage others. Even though she had stage 3 cancer, Marshall had experienced healing that she had considered “miraculous” throughout her life, and she believed that the same would be true in this instance.

Several years prior, Kenny appeared to have a stroke, but when she took him to the hospital, the doctor could find no evidence of one. Eventually, the doctors diagnosed him with viral encephalitis. Unfortunately, his symptoms worsened instead of improving; soon, he was unable to walk or talk.

As time went on and Kenny remained in the same state, the doctors believed he could face permanent brain damage. Marshall prayed, and, within a few days, Kenny stood up and managed to walk. A nurse called it a miracle. Over the following months, Kenny regained almost all of his mobility and speech, and the brain damage that remains is minimal.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Get Straws, Gloves, And Fuzzy Socks *(Round 7)*

Marshall reflects on how a “community of people came together and showered love” on her, her family, and one another during her cancer treatment. “I didn’t conquer cancer on my own. I did it in the middle of a community.”

This community extended beyond friends and family—it included colleagues, as well. Marshall was widely known at AT&T, and people were concerned for her and wanted to help in whatever way they could. Many of them brought her family food so that Marshall wouldn’t have to worry about feeding them.

Marshall and Kenny instilled this importance of taking care of one another in their children, too. “They know that I see myself as the product of the village, and the blessings we enjoy happened because of the people who poured into me, into my schools, and into my neighborhood.” When Marshall was diagnosed with cancer, her kids saw this support of the village firsthand.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Do You

Marshall quickly rose through the ranks in her work and became one of the youngest vice presidents at Pacific Bell, which had merged with Southwestern Bell at that point. Not long after, her boss called to tell her that she had been selected to be an officer of the corporation. But, 19 years after she had first been told to change her clothes and hair by another boss, this boss made similar comments about the way she dressed, her hairstyle, her nickname, and even the way she spoke.

Marshall was unwilling to conform to the boss's unreasonable expectations and turned down the promotion. She told Kenny, "Nineteen years ago they made me take off my red shoes and take down my braids. They don't get to do that again. I've got to be me, and I am Cynt. Period." Being more herself meant that Marshall finally gave herself permission to dress in a way that was more authentically her.

"Do you" is a message that Marshall shares with her children, but, she notes, there is a limit. Respect for others is important, and there are instances in which some facets of their personality may need to wait to come out. She also reminds them that there's a "difference between *moderating* who you are and *changing* who you are. ... [I]f someone ever asks my kids, or the people who work for me, to compromise their integrity, or fundamentally change who they are, that's when they know they can calmly stand up and walk out and I'll have their backs 100 percent."

This belief is one Marshall has acted upon several times over the course of her career. She turned down a number of promotions because each of them in some way or another conflicted with her beliefs and who she was. Marshall has experienced and brushed aside instances of discrimination or unkindness, but she still believed in bringing her whole self to each of these jobs.

In the case of the offer to become an officer, Marshall's authenticity paid off. After she turned down the offer her boss had made at the time, the CEO called Marshall and reiterated the offer. But, this time, he explicitly told her that the expectation was for her to continue to be exactly the way she was, because that was why they had selected her in the first place. Marshall accepted.

Rethink What's Possible

(Round 8)

Marshall describes the importance of hair, particularly for African American women. She recounts how when she was young and many women were trying to have hair that appeared more “white,” her parents encouraged her and her siblings to love their natural hair. Over the years that followed, she had an Afro and then long braids, until her boss bullied her into a more “*appropriate*” hairdo.

“Then, for almost thirty years, my hair was straight, shoulder-length, and *appropriate* for what everyone else wanted to see. Then came cancer.”

While colon cancer treatments don’t typically cause one’s hair to fall out completely, Marshall decided to get her hair cut short to preempt the painful experience of seeing it fall out. Around the same time, Marshall’s then-18-year-old son Anthony asked his parents if he could get a mohawk. Marshall was initially opposed, but her husband pointed out to her that he had always been respectful, willingly abiding by all of his parents’ expectations. He encouraged her to step back and let Anthony make his own choices.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Know You Are Loved

Providing love and help to those around them is central to the Marshall family. This started first with their adopted children, who needed stability, security, and love. “After that, we help them understand their place in the village, and that the Lord put us all on the earth to see about one another and take care of one another.” When people are in need, the Marshalls help.

Anthony understood this message from a young age. When he was four, he began to see a feature on TV about a girl who was up for adoption. He told his parents about her and that he wanted to adopt her in the way they had adopted him. Marshall and Kenny were ready to add to their family and called the number on the TV screen.

Much like Anthony, Shirley had been abandoned and had numerous “special needs.” The Marshall family adopted her, and, around the same time, they ended up bringing a third child into their family.

From the time that the Marshalls adopted Anthony, they wanted to understand where his older brother Rickey ended up. Several years later, they were able to reconnect the two boys. While Rickey continued to live in the residence he was staying in at the time, he began to spend weekends and holidays with the Marshalls and became a part of the Marshall family.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Focus On The Finish Line

(Round 9)

Marshall was determined not to let her cancer treatment disrupt the lives of her family. She had to grapple with the fact that while all of them continued with their own activities, she herself couldn't participate in the way she had previously.

"I was used to being on the go all the time, and it was a consistent struggle to accept that being still was the most important task I had right then. Not that I had much of a choice. Chemo took such a toll that being more involved was almost impossible."

Slowing down wasn't the only thing Marshall had to get accustomed to. Her memory and recall deteriorated, too, due to what is known as "chemo brain." On one particularly bad day, Marshall couldn't recall her daughter's name—which she and her daughter still make light of and laugh about to this day.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Show Up

“The message ‘you are worthy of love, and you are worthy of being cared for’ is powerful. I’ve seen how, if someone feels as if they came into the world unloved or unwanted, that can mess them up for life.”

When Anthony and Shirley were young, both Marshall and Kenny were working high-pressure jobs, and via a series of unfortunate events, one day neither of them was able to pick the kids up from after-school care on time. Because of the children’s abandonment issues, the event was traumatic.

The couple decided one of them would need to stay home to be there for their kids. The pay stubs were clear: Marshall earned more, so Kenny quit his job. In response to questions about his decision, Kenny told a reporter, “A real man will do whatever it takes for his family to thrive.”

Marshall adds that balancing her job with her family has not always been easy, and, in some cases, it has been impossible. That’s why she emphasizes integration more than anything else, bringing her whole self to both parts of her life, and showing up above all else.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

It's Gonna Be Okay

(Round 10)

Even though the chemotherapy often left Marshall feeling unwell and weak, there were moments when she just had to grin and bear it. One of these times was when the president of the United States called.

Years earlier, Marshall was invited to attend a campaign event of then-candidate Barack Obama. When Obama went around greeting the attendees after, Marshall asked if she could pray for him.

Years later, while Marshall was undergoing chemo, President Obama was attending an event to which Marshall was invited. She was visibly unwell and “didn’t look like the person he’d met just a few years before,” yet when Obama approached her, it was clear that he had been prepped and recognized her. This time around, he offered her his prayers.

“[I]n those moments, I was grateful that I’d made the effort. For a few minutes, life continued on, and cancer didn’t exist.”

Don't Do Life Alone

Marshall spent much of her career at AT&T in California. But, as she rose through the ranks, she knew she would one day receive “the call” to become an executive in another state. Finally, the day came, and Marshall was told she would be moving to North Carolina.

Making the move looked a little different for Marshall than it did for many other executives. She was determined to have her family move at the same time as she did, which meant she needed to negotiate the date of her move. It was a lot for Marshall and her family, but the right people—her “posse”—came at the right time to make it just a little bit easier.

One member of Marshall’s “posse” is Hokey, a woman Marshall had known back in California but who had moved back to North Carolina years earlier. Another is Yvonne, who had been Marshall’s best friend in college, whom she had drifted apart from over the years. When Marshall moved to North Carolina, she happened to run into Yvonne, and they quickly rekindled their friendship. The last two members of the posse, Bev and Lisa, were friends Marshall made at church.

“Almost overnight, we became the posse. I had lots of acquaintances all over the state of North Carolina because of my job, but these were the women who knew the real me and whom I knew I could trust with anything. Even my life.”

Learn From The Journey

(Round 11)

“Handle your business” is something Marshall says often to her children. Their business was getting an education—even when Marshall was sick. Marshall’s business was AT&T. Throughout her career, she regularly worked seven days a week and was committed to her work.

But, one day, in the middle of Marshall’s treatment, someone came to the door to inform her, in essence, that an inquisition was occurring at AT&T: Someone was trying to dig up dirt on Marshall and was using her absence against her. Marshall was aware of the ugly side of corporate politics and knew that some people can be suspicious of others’ success.

“My heart was as broken as my body, but my integrity was at stake, and I wasn’t going to let a little chemo sickness stop me. It was time to handle my business.” Months later, after she had refuted the claims against her, Marshall received an apology.

Yet, luckily, this negative situation was more the exception than the rule during Marshall’s time battling cancer. More often than not, she received support and care from those around her.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

It Takes A Village

Not long after the Marshalls moved to North Carolina, Anthony saw an item on TV about a brother and sister who were foster children and up for adoption. The family had always intended to adopt again, and Anthony was insistent that these two young people were meant to join their family. The two children had been between their biological mother's home and foster care for years and after a few months, Marshall called the social worker assigned to their case.

Marshall explains that throughout her career and years as a parent, she has learned to separate between what she calls crystal balls—what's truly important—and rubber balls: everything else. "Rubber balls bounce back to you if you drop them—or better yet, they bounce off to another person. Crystal balls, though, are the ones that leave shattered glass on the floor. If they break, you don't get them back."

For Marshall, her kids' education and church on Sundays were crystal balls. Sports practices? Rubber balls. But, for many years, sports games and dance recitals were crystal. Marshall made certain to prioritize her children, even if it meant flying from a conference to make it in time for a game or recital.

When the Marshalls were exploring adopting Alicia and her brother, they thought that the two kids would be in middle school and high school, just like Anthony and Shirley. But Alicia had been held back, meaning that she would still be in elementary school. "Fifth grade added another whole set of crystal balls to my already full hands. This was not my plan."

Even though it wasn't part of their plan, Marshall and Kenny still proceeded with the adoption. Alicia and her brother came home with them, but it soon became clear that her brother would not be able to stay. After her brother left, Alicia eventually settled into a routine with her new family. "It was hard to remember the time when she wasn't part of our family."

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

Be Grateful

(Round 12)

When the day arrived for Marshall's final chemo round, she was certain that the cancer was gone and wouldn't come back. She celebrated that day—and again a month later when the scans confirmed that the cancer was truly gone.

But cancer like hers has a high recurrence rate, so her doctor suggested that she keep her port in her—to which the portable pump, Winston, would attach. Many patients choose to keep theirs, so they don't have to undergo surgery again if the cancer returns.

"I knew my cancer was gone for good, though. It had done what it needed to do in my life. I agreed to leave the port alone for a few weeks, until those thirty-day scans showed no signs of cancer, but then I insisted it was time to move on. The port had to go."

Marshall wouldn't just rid herself of her port, known as Willis, unceremoniously, though. She had plans for it.

CHAPTER THIRTY

Take Responsibility

Marshall recounts the death of her father, noting that even though they had been estranged, he called her a few months prior to his death, telling her that he was sick and apologizing for the way he had behaved.

In spite of the difficult relationship they had, Marshall decided to attend his funeral. She believed in the verse in the Bible that says, “Honor your father and your mother,” a message she shared with her children, as well. In the same way that Marshall believed in honoring her father, she expected her children to honor their birth parents.

Marshall and Kenny openly talk about the birth families and adoption stories of each of their children with them. They want them to know that their mothers loved them even if they couldn’t care for them. By going to her father’s funeral, Marshall was showing her children “what it means to respect a parent, no matter what happened and what they’ve done.”

When Marshall was diagnosed with colon cancer, her oncologist asked if there were a history of it in her family. It didn’t occur to her at the time because she wasn’t certain of the diagnosis, but she and her siblings believe that her father had died of colon cancer. Not knowing proved dangerous for Marshall and her siblings, as colon cancer can be tied to genetics, so she encouraged the rest of them to have colonoscopies. Thankfully, none of them had cancer.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

Find The “CAN” In Cancer

Marshall and her “posse” go on an annual “ladies-only” holiday. The year that Marshall finished chemo, they treated the trip like an “end-of-cancer party.” Their boisterousness and joy attracted other people to join them on the hotel’s excursion boat for the party.

When others heard what they were celebrating, many of them shared with Marshall their own battles with cancer. Marshall used the boat excursion to say her goodbyes to cancer, said a prayer, and threw Willis, her port, into the water.

The experience with all these strangers reminded Marshall of her mother’s message that her journey would inspire people.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

Plans Change

After she completed her treatment, life started to return to normal for Marshall and her family. Not everything returned to normal, however. “A person doesn’t go through something life threatening and come out unchanged. But in many cases—and in my case—the new normal was better in a lot of ways.”

Marshall slowed down her pace at work and stopped traveling for work quite so much. She began to think about moving on from AT&T, but before she acted on those thoughts, an executive called her, telling her she was needed at the corporate office. Marshall initially planned to turn down the promotion until he told her that the role would be to work on the company’s culture.

She agreed and moved to Dallas, Texas, becoming a senior vice president focused on employee engagement, talent management, performance development, diversity, inclusion, and corporate culture nationally.

“My bosses were right; this was a job where I could pour myself into lives and careers. This wasn’t a delay of my passion; this was my passion.”

Finally, Marshall retired from AT&T and planned to take some time off. Instead, she ended up working as a consultant for Dow Chemical, focusing on the company’s culture and diversity, equity, and inclusion strategies. Just when they were about to leave Dallas and return to North Carolina, Marshall received a call from Mark Cuban. He wanted her to come work for the Dallas Mavericks.

Marshall knew that the Mavericks were in a crisis and their culture was a mess, but she also believed in Cuban's commitment to improving it. Marshall saw that she was perfectly poised to take on the challenge and accepted the position. "[O]nce again, I had been chosen."

EPILOGUE

Marshall believes that one of her roles in life is to encourage others. She also doesn't believe that there are accidents. That's why she has made a point to talk about her experience with cancer and why she decided to write this book. "From the day of my first diagnosis, cancer became my touch-point into thousands of lives."

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