

## CHAPTER 1

### *Pastor Approved*

On Saturday, December 12, 1992, I attended a singles Christmas party at my church. That was where I began to get to know Connie. I had noticed her in our Sunday school class but hadn't talked to her much. During the party, Pastor Jerry approached me and suggested I talk to a really good-looking woman who was there. I thought, here we go again with someone trying to play matchmaker. I had discovered being single that everyone and their brother tried to fix me up.

The pastor was referring to Connie. There she was, in a black leather skirt and sweater with fur around the collar. She looked breathtaking. Later in the evening, the pastor's wife, Kay, approached me about talking to Connie as well.

Everyone was now ready to eat, however, and I was one of the last people in line. Food was arranged buffet style so I got my food and went to sit down in the screened-in patio room where everyone else was. There was only one table left with two seats, so I sat beside the hostess of the party, Millie. I had gotten to know her over the past few years and she had become a good friend. The next thing I knew, Connie came over and

asked me if the seat next to me was taken. I nearly freaked out! I didn't know what to do. I told myself, get a grip and breathe, just breathe. I was pretty much forced to talk with her.

At that time, I was extremely shy. Connie was very outgoing. She had no problem striking up a conversation with anyone. During our conversation, I discovered Connie and I had a lot more in common than I thought: we were both from the same state, lived about two and a half hours apart, and had a lot of the same interests. I surprised myself by how well I did in talking with her. Before I knew it, dinner was over, so we started to clean up.

Pastor Jerry walked over to me and suggested I invite Connie out for coffee afterward. I didn't do that. I had just come out of a long-distance relationship that ended in a broken engagement, so I did not feel ready to pursue another.

The day after the Christmas party, Connie invited the singles Sunday School class to her house for fellowship and leftovers. Most of the people in the class went and so did I. It was a lot of fun. I got to see Connie in her own environment. I had the opportunity to talk to her for a little bit while she was in the kitchen. I helped bring dishes from the kitchen to everyone. Connie had done the majority of the cooking for the party. I didn't stay long since it was close to Christmas and I still had some shopping to do.

Sunday, December 20, 1992, I finally got up the nerve to ask Connie out. We were walking down the hallway after Sunday school, heading into the sanctuary for the church service when I asked if she would like to go to lunch with me. I wasn't really expecting her to say yes because I felt she was way out of my league. When she said yes, panic 101 flooded in. What do I do now? Not expecting that response, I now had to decide where we'd go. Oh, by the way, right after this, I had to go on the platform and play the drums, as I was the drummer for the praise and worship band. I had to work to focus, but I managed to do alright. It was a good thing I knew all the songs well.

For our lunch, I decided on a Mexican restaurant in Boca Raton. We had a good time just talking and getting to know each other. I ordered a combo plate and Connie ordered a taco salad. She ate all of hers, the shell included. Since I was finished and hadn't eaten all of mine, she wanted to know if she could have it. Wow, was I impressed! I found a woman who liked to eat. I had always seen women barely eat when they were out with a guy. After lunch, we strolled on the beach and just continued talking. It turned out to be an absolutely wonderful day.

For a period of time after this, we saw each other sporadically. Though I really liked her, neither of us was ready to leap into anything serious, as we discovered that both of us had just come out of broken engagements. Whenever we felt like one of us was starting to get serious, we backed off a little and just took it slow. We became really close friends. At times we wanted to take it to the next level, but we waited, which was a wise decision. I know now that investing the time to really get to know each other is well worth the effort for a couple.

It amazed me what Connie could inspire me to do. She was an avid reader and suggested a few books she would like me to read if I was interested in doing so. I agreed, thinking that I would go buy them and read them when I could. I did that for the first book, but she bought me the second book and suggested that we read it together. Huh? I didn't know about that. She said, "Oh, come on, let's try it and if you don't like it we will stop, okay?"

When we read the book together, she would read a chapter out loud then I would read one. I was not the best reader in the world, but she did not care at all about that. She would help me with words I did not know. If I did not stop at periods or pause at commas, she would remind me, "You are running everything together." It gave me a lot of confidence. The books we read and discussed brought us closer; the friendship really blossomed.

One book in particular was *Search for Significance*, by Robert S. McGee. That book changed my life forever (thank you, Robert McGee).

It is about self-worth and has an accompanying workbook. We each had our own book and workbook. We'd then get together and discuss in detail what we read. We spent a massive amount of time talking through it; it was quite a process. This was something Connie enjoyed: deep conversation. She liked to get to the root of the issues: why, how come, what do you think that was about? Not just any answer would do for her.

For me, this was uncharted territory. Prior to this, I had not come to grips with a lot of issues in my life. Like a dog with a bone, she would not let go until we worked through those issues. I thought maybe she would forget. No way! At some point, she would bring the subject up again or propose the idea of us working in the book. Finally, I just adjusted to digging deeper and cleaning out the closet, so to speak. One of the greatest things Connie did for me was to see beyond my outer appearance, look inside me, and see something worth investing in. I loved that about her.

In March of 1992 in one of our conversations, Connie told me that at the age of sixteen she'd had Hodgkin's disease. I wasn't familiar with that, so she explained it to me. Connie was a registered nurse and made it clear that there was a chance she could get cancer again, even though it had been almost eighteen years since she'd had Hodgkin's disease. She seemed sure that it would not return, which was reassuring to me. I thought about it for a little bit and came to the conclusion that it was unlikely it would return. I was willing to pursue our relationship. We started dating more seriously about April or May of that year.

Sometime toward the end of June, Connie told me she had found a lump on her right breast. She didn't seem particularly worried about it. The only time I had dealt with cancer before this was with my grandfather. When I was around seven or eight, I lost him to stomach cancer. At the time, we lived in California and he lived in Pennsylvania. Beyond that, I had not had to deal with it. I did think about the "what if" scenario—could I handle it?

A few weeks later, she had a doctor's appointment. He wanted to get

a biopsy of the lump. As the day of the biopsy got closer, we prayed about it and she didn't seem worried. Connie wanted to go by herself to get the procedure done.

There were a lot of "what ifs" going on in my mind. What if it was cancer. What would I do? How would I handle it? The only thing that kept it from overwhelming me was Connie's lack of worry. We were fairly confident that everything would be alright.

I remember the day of the results of the biopsy all too well. I had to be at work until I received a call from her. I was dealing with it the best I could. It was on my mind a lot. I tried not to think about it, so I kept really busy. It was difficult, as dealing with cancer was new territory for me.

It was around 2:00 p.m. when one of the guys at work came and told me Connie was in the parking lot wanting to speak to me. I walked out and saw her in her car. When she saw me, she immediately got out of the car, came up to me, and threw her arms around me. In a low voice, she whispered in my right ear, "It's cancer."

I was stunned. I did not know what to say, so I just held her. I was holding someone who'd just found out she had cancer again. This was not what I was expecting to hear at all. What do I do now? I thought and the world seemed to stop for a moment or two.

Thinking about it now as I write this, Connie had a tremendous amount of trust in me so early in our friendship/relationship. It blows me away that, with such a personal issue as this, she let me in. She felt safe with me. I was so stunned by the news that it took my breath away. I had such a massive array of emotions, fear, and uncertainty. I was scared and I did not know what to do except hold her tight.

I was not aware of how long I held her, but I eventually let her go and went in to talk to my boss to see if I could get the rest of the day off. I went back outside and told Connie I could leave for the day, so we drove back to her house. On the way, a multitude of thoughts ran through my mind. I knew I had developed feelings for her, and now this?

We sat and talked for hours. I could not believe how long we talked. I don't remember what time it was when I went home. That night and the following day, I did a lot of reflecting about everything that was happening. I knew how I felt about her, but I was also scared. I wasn't sure what to do.

One of the things I realized was there was hope that things could work out for us. Even though she was beautiful and I was attracted to her beauty, there was even more that I was drawn to. She had a wonderful heart, a gentle spirit, and a great relationship with Jesus Christ. These were the most important things to me in looking for someone. Good looks are only for the short term, but what's on the inside is there for the long haul. Connie had everything I was looking for in the long run. You just don't find that in everyone you meet. It's kind of like a diamond—the more you look at it and examine it, the more you see its beauty. Most diamonds have flaws, but their beauty overshadows the flaws. Connie wasn't perfect, but her inward and outward beauty overshadowed any flaws.

Now there was this void, the unknown, darkness where there is no light. I was willing to walk in the unknown and seize the prospect of something more with her. I realized that no matter what, I could not let her go through this alone because a true friend doesn't walk away.

Connie made doctors' appointments to get information on what the treatment would be. The course of action was to undergo a mastectomy with reconstruction. This totally rocked her world. She was not happy with the plan set forth by the doctors. I didn't understand much about mastectomies or what that entailed. Connie conveyed to me what was involved and what the options would be. After that explanation, I was rocked, too. I did the best I could to support her. She needed some time to cope with all of this.

When Connie had had radiation for the Hodgkin's disease at such a young age, it was concentrated from the abdominal area up to her neck. That stunted the growth of her upper body where she did not develop as she should have and she was self-conscious about it. And now this?

*You Have Got to Be Kidding Me!*

I was pondering a lot of things. What if our relationship developed into something more, could I come to grips with a mastectomy? There was also the possibility of what they called reconstruction. This was a matter of rebuilding the breast with an implant of skin and possibly muscle. As I was working through this in my mind, Connie said she had a different idea.