

One

Was life fair? Not in the least. Not when you worked your ass off for everything you've ever dreamed of and *poof*, in an instant, with one sentence...it was gone!

Life doesn't always work out the way we want. No matter what you've done or how you've done it, something without a doubt gets in the way. You could spend days, weeks, months, even years working for the things you want out of life, only for it to be taken from you as if your dreams and schemes never existed. As if you had never tried at all...

It's funny how life seems to work out the opposite of what we want. Why bother to dream at all if they never come to fruition? *But*, if we don't have our dreams and goals to motivate and guide us, where would we be in this world? Lost, stumbling aimlessly, and not driven by desire, blood, sweat, and tears!

We've all heard the phrase, "*Life isn't fair*," so why are we so defeated when things don't turn out our way? When everything seems to fall apart? Shouldn't we just keep trying? "*If you fall down, get back up, dust yourself off, and try again.*"

But what if...*just to be fair in this unfair world*...what if we weren't meant to have those dreams at all? What if they were only to teach us something we didn't see in ourselves? What if there was something better than our dreams waiting for us on the path of life?

Two

Ever since Alexis Finley had been a young girl, she'd dreamed of becoming an astronaut. She'd wanted to explore the universe—do something meaningful with her life. She was mere inches from making her dreams come true. The grueling hours she'd spent at work; she'd practically lived there. All for this one unexpected moment in her life that destroyed everything. *It was so unfair!*

Time seemed to stand still in her heart. The seconds ticked away as she sat in the expensive brown leather chair, staring speechless at the woman in front of her. Suddenly, life as she'd known it came to a screeching halt!

It didn't matter how many times she blinked, she was still sitting in the same chair in front of the same doctor she had known for years. They'd taken a class together in college, for heaven sakes.

Alexis tried to let the words spoken to her sink in, but it just wasn't registering completely. She prayed a silent prayer deep inside herself that perhaps she had heard it all wrong. By chance, the test results were someone else's, not hers. Doctors were known to make mistakes, sometimes picking up the wrong report or reading the wrong patient's file. Had the lab made an error? That happened sometimes, too, a false positive. So why couldn't this one time be just that?

Alexis would get a second opinion, that's what she'd do! She'd say, "Thank you," and get up and walk out the door. Yet, she couldn't move, her body numb and her mind in denial from what the doctor had just said.

"Alexis, we have to start treatment immediately. It's extremely important before your condition gets worse. Time and early discovery is your ally, but we won't know about that until after the biopsy," said Dr. Sarah Ramsey.

"Are you sure it's breast cancer?" Alexis asked anxiously. Her mind was whirling. This made no sense at all! She'd been checking herself off-and-on for years, and she'd never found a single lump, not even suspected one. Had she examined herself wrong? Maybe she didn't realize something might have been a lump; maybe she'd thought it was something else, but never cancer!

Alexis had turned forty just last month, and now she'd have to have a mammogram every year for the rest of her life. "*My life*," her mind repeated. How much time did she really have left? Panic was starting to set in.

"Yes, Alexis, I'm sure. I've checked your mammogram films and the ultrasound several times. I'm sorry, but the density of the images shows you definitely have breast cancer. There's no mistake," Sarah Ramsey stated firmly, yet warmly.

"I guess..." Alexis's throat tightened and she swallowed. "This being my first mammogram and the additional ultrasound was just...just an initial precaution, ya' know? 'Cause it was my first..." she stammered. "I thought you wanted to see me about the results in-person as a courtesy and a baseline test for the future? It didn't occur to me that anything was wrong." The room was suddenly too warm, much too warm for her liking. Sweat rolled down the back of her neck, wetting the collar of her blouse. She twisted her long, wavy, brunette hair and clipped it into place on the back of her head, hoping it would cool her down.

“I wish I was wrong, Alexis, I truly do, but I’m afraid the results show you *have* cancer. I’ll call Dr. Brownski, an Oncology Surgeon at the Anderson Cancer Center in Orlando, to schedule a lumpectomy and a biopsy. He’s one of the best, Alexis. We’ll go from there,” Sarah Ramsey offered with an encouraging smile.

“Is there any other alternative?”

“I’m not sure what you’re asking, Alexis,” Dr. Ramsey frowned. “Until we have the biopsy—”

“Is there an option for a full double mastectomy?” Alexis interrupted. She watched as the doctor’s right eyebrow shot up. She had caught her off-guard, maybe even surprising her.

“Well, I wouldn’t suggest a mastectomy until after we have the results of the biopsy from the lumpectomy. I’m not even sure why you’d consider such evasive, extensive surgery without knowing what we’re up against. Most women don’t want their breasts removed because it takes away from their need to feel like a woman. As you know, a double mastectomy is done to remove both breasts. What I have seen from the images, the cancer is confined in the right breast. Most doctors won’t consider a double mastectomy unless there is substantial evidence to do so. It’s also a very dangerous surgery with a long recuperation, therapy, and reconstruction. ”

“You know I work for NASA, right?” Alexis blurted out.

Dr. Ramsey nodded, placing a lock of her reddish brown hair behind her right ear. Her intelligent green eyes searched Alexis’s face as she waited for her to state her point, which the doctor couldn’t quite grasp at that moment.

“Well, NASA has been considering me for the next space shuttle launch. If they knew about the cancer, there would be no way in hell they’d let me go!”

“I see,” Sarah said, as she shifted in her chair.

“Do you?” Alexis’s voice rose, which caught the doctor extremely off-guard. “Because I have worked my ass off for this opportunity!” The anger stage was taking over much sooner than expected, but Dr. Sarah Ramsey had seen it all before.

“I can’t just sit and watch it pass me by!” Alexis shouted. She didn’t know where the anger came from. It wasn’t like her to jump down someone’s throat for no apparent reason. Although there was a reason, wasn’t there? Her dream was coming to a dead end. Thrown in the trash to be recycled. Never to be lived.

Dr. Ramsey cleared her throat. “Alexis, I know it’s a great deal to take in, but this is your health we’re talking about. I can’t lie to NASA or keep your records confidential from them in this type of instance. Besides, NASA will have their own doctors check you out before any such mission. There could even be legal repercussions for both of us by hiding this diagnosis. I understand being an astronaut is an incredible opportunity for you, but your health is more important than flying to outer space.”

Alexis grabbed her purse from beside the chair and stood up. She didn’t want to sit here any longer and listen to this doctor tell her she couldn’t live her dreams.

“Alexis, wait! Where are you going? We need to discuss, albeit prematurely, your options and schedule the lumpectomy!”

“I need some air.” Alexis turned and opened the door, then slammed it shut behind her. She knew she was being selfish, and that her health was important, but so was everything else she’d worked so hard to accomplish. Or maybe she was just in denial about the whole thing. She was only forty years old and had her whole life in front of her. Why did this have to happen to her? Why and how did she end up with cancer? She worked out and ate the right foods. All her physical exams had come back excellent until this one. So, why her, why now?

Three

Alexis rushed down the hall and stood in front of the elevator. She poked the arrow down button with her index finger. A bell *dinged*, and the doors opened. She dashed in—took a quick peek behind her to see if Dr. Ramsey had followed her—then hit the L for the lobby. She was so thankful there was no one else in the elevator. She needed to calm down and think about what Dr. Ramsey had told her.

She took deep, easy breathes, in through her nose and out through her mouth. As the elevator doors slid open; bright light blinded her. She raised her left hand and rubbed her eyes, feeling a headache starting to surface. She walked out of the elevator and through the lobby of the medical center.

The future woman astronaut of the United States of America left without giving her doctor the chance to change her destiny and her dream. “*Just who am I trying to kid?*” Alexis screamed silently to herself.

Sarah Ramsey—she was practically a friend because they’d known each other so long—Sarah wanted to help, but Alexis just wasn’t ready yet.

By the time she reached her car and sat inside, all the anger she’d taken out on her *friend* just minutes before came pouring out. Alexis Finley had always considered herself a strong person and didn’t let anything get in her way, but the cancer was beyond her control. She needed to sit and

think about what the doctor had said and make some decisions, even if it meant postponing her dreams. How could she give up her dreams when she was almost there?

Alexis pounded the steering wheel with her right palm, accidentally hitting the horn. It blared, abrupt and loud. She didn't even glance around to see if anyone was looking at her. She didn't care if they were. She finally realized she could either sit here and feel sorry for herself, dwelling over how life wasn't fair, or she could do something about it. But what could she do?

Her dream had always been to explore outer space, and she was determined not to let anything stop her. She had to come up with a plan. There had to be something she could do and still live all her dreams, but she wasn't sure what that plan was yet.

Searching for the keys in her lap, she found them and started the car, Alexis knew she didn't want to go home, nor did she want to be around other people. She just wanted to be alone and think. It was time to come up with a new, *temporary* plan. After all, she wasn't dying...yet...or was she?

Four

Alexis drove out of the parking lot and headed towards the Martin Andersen Beachline Express. When she arrived at Cape Canaveral, she drove to Canaveral City Park. There she sat and stared at the Atlantis Space Shuttle in the far distance. Imagining the day she would climb inside one just like it and soar through the sky towards the unknown; to a whole new universe where she didn't have to think about her life and everything that had gone wrong.

Now, it would take years before she received another chance. *IF*—and it was a very big “IF”—she ever received another chance. That is, *IF* she could beat breast cancer. This opportunity was something she wasn't sure she could pass up. Her health was important to her, but so was her job, and if her boss found out, there would be no flying into outer space.

Reclining her seat back, she closed her eyes and rubbed her temples, trying to calm down enough to ease the tension headache. Her thoughts involuntarily went to her late husband, and she wished Jay could be with her. Jay would've known what to do. He could always comfort her in a way no man had ever done before or since. He was thoughtful and kind, always putting her needs above his own. God, how she wished he was here with her now!

There was never a day she didn't think of him and miss him. She asked herself as she did all the time, “*Why did he have to die?*” Then, she wondered how she had been able to cope with his

death. Of course, she had continued to mourn, but she really couldn't remember how she'd got through the loss and pain of losing someone so close to her.

After the funeral seven months ago, she'd concentrated on raising their seventeen-year-old son, Colton, but she'd jumped straight back into her work. She wasn't thankful Jay had died when he did. She'd been glad at the time that Colton was almost old enough to take care of himself, but she wasn't sure if he grieved the way she did. So many nights of lying in bed crying herself to sleep; then one day she climbed out of bed and moved on with her life as if nothing had ever happened.

Colton, on the other hand had never cried; at least, not in front of her. He just seemed to isolate himself from his father's death. To a certain extent, Colton helped around the house when she worked late. He was just like his father, in some ways, always thinking of others. She was glad, but also hoped, he was getting what he needed—closure. She'd always worried about whether her son had accepted the loss of his father. But, now, it hit her that maybe she hadn't found closure, either.

Instantly, Alexis sat up, startled by the revelation, but she couldn't think about it now. She had other decisions that needed to be made, so instead she viewed the scenery around her. A man wearing a Miami Dolphins' T-shirt was walking his German Shepard on a leash. The dog stayed near his owner, looking up at him every few seconds to see if his master was still beside him. To the man's left, a young couple sat on a blanket staring into each other's eyes and chatting. The man smiled at his lover and leaned over to kiss her on the lips. They seemed to be in love, tuned into each other, as if no one else in the world mattered.

She thought of Jay again and how much in love they once had been. She missed him terribly. Her heart still ached from the loss of him in her life. Maybe if Jay had been with her, things wouldn't have fallen to pieces; maybe she'd have had a closer relationship with Colton.

However, as the years passed by, even before Jay's demise, she had spent more time at work than at home. She had, in many ways, neglected her husband and son. She put herself first and her work became her life. She did love her family, but somewhere along the way, she'd lost the need to be at home. Jay had never said anything to her about it; never mentioned she should spend more time with them and not so much at work.

Right now, though, Alexis had to stop this useless woolgathering. She couldn't change the past. She knew it was fine to think about him, but she needed to start planning her future. She had a son who was almost an adult, but he still very much needed her. If something were to happen to her, if she were to leave this world, he would be alone.

Colton was an only child with no brothers or sisters to advise him. She was his only family, which meant, as much as she hated to do it, she needed to talk to him about the breast cancer. He could reason with her, just like Jay used to do and help her make the right decisions. Yet, she was the parent, the adult, and well aware of what was best for the both of them.

She clicked on her seat belt, started the car, and drove towards home.

Five

When Alexis pulled into her familiar driveway, she pushed a small button on her visor to open the garage door. She parked her car inside and climbed out. She entered through a door to the kitchen and set her purse on the table. As she glanced at the clock on the wall, she saw it was almost two in the afternoon. Colton would be home from school any time now.

She was dreading this conversation with her son and she was filled with nervous energy. She went through the automatic motions of fixing a sandwich, even though she wasn't really hungry, she knew she needed to try to eat something. She'd eaten nothing since early this morning before leaving for her *routine* appointment with Dr. Ramsey. The appointment that could change her life forever, yet, she couldn't think about that now. She just wanted things to be as normal as possible when Colton walked through the door.

She sat down after setting the sandwich and a glass of water on the kitchen dinette table. The house was quiet except for the sound of the clock ticking.

When she finished what she could eat, she placed the plate with the half-eaten sandwich in the sink and sat back down at the small table. The front door opened with a squeak, Colton was now home from school.

"Hello," she said.

“Alexis, what are you doing home so early?” He slumped into the chair across from her, as far as he could away from her, dropping his books on the table.

She hated it when he called her by her first name instead of Mom, like he should. It was something he’d started right after Jay had died.

“I had an appointment today, so I took the rest of the day off.”

He said nothing to her. Was she actually expecting him to? They hadn’t talked but a few words here and there to each other in seven months. Should she tell him about the cancer? What would he say to her? Would he even care? Yes, of course he should care what happened to her! *Right?*

Scattered thoughts were running wild in her head. She couldn’t control them. She had never been a person to sit and analyze her life; she just went out and did it. *So why now?* Why worry about what her son would think of her? Why did she feel the need to tell him about the cancer?

She rationalized that she could have the surgery and he would never know. The cancer would be gone and she wouldn’t have to say a word to him, and life as they knew it would continue. But did she want life to go on with them at separate corners? With them ignoring each other when they were in the same room? She wasn’t sure. She hadn’t been a real mother to him in over twelve years.

Maybe she needed to sit and think about things before telling him the truth, but hadn’t she thought through all this before she came home? A nagging thought in the back of her mind surfaced, “*What if something goes wrong with the surgery? What if the cancer doesn’t go away?*”

Suddenly she realized, “*It was now or never.*” If she didn’t talk to him now, she knew she’d put everything aside and move on. She’d keep everything inside just like she’d done when Jay died.

The words out of her mouth, however, were work-related—just like always, “I just received notice that I’ll be part of the crew going on the next shuttle launch.”

A look of uncertainty crossed his face. Was he happy or upset about the whole thing, she couldn’t tell. They sat across from each other as she smoothed her fingers across the table waiting for him to say something. She saw his mouth open, then close.

She didn’t want to sit waiting for him to speak, so she broke the silence. “Should I ask if you’re happy for me?” Still nothing came. “Colton, please talk to me. Tell me what you’re thinking.” She kept her eyes on his, waiting.

“I think it’s great news, but only because I know how bad you’ve been wanting to go. You’ve worked hard at NASA to become the next to go up, but don’t you think being with me is more important than going up in that stupid space shuttle?”

“That space shuttle is not stupid. And yes, I do think you’re more important, more than anything. But... But this is my dream. Haven’t I always told you to live your dreams no matter what?”

“Alexis, work isn’t more important than family. Why is it so hard for you to understand? Dad wouldn’t want you to choose your job over your family, so why are you?”

She felt a wave of tingles pass through her body as if she’d just seen a ghost. Colton didn’t talk about his father. He’d never brought him up in any conversation. Maybe this was his way of getting her to listen to him. She didn’t know. “I never said I was choosing work over my family. I just...I just have other priorities right now.”

“You know what, Alexis? It sounds to me like you’re being selfish and inconsiderate. No wonder Dad left us!” His anger was blatant.

“Wait a minute, Colton. Your father committed suicide for reasons I don’t know. I didn’t make him do it, he chose to!” Alexis was angry now, too.

“Maybe if you’d been at home more he wouldn’t have?” he blurted out.

“Don’t you dare go there? I loved your father with all my heart, and I’m sorry you think it was all my fault he took his life, but don’t you think for one second I was to blame!”

“Well, I do!” He slammed his fist on the table, causing the saltshaker to fall over and spill. He wasn’t going to sit here and listen to her choose work over him—again. It was always about her, always about Alexis. He pushed himself up from the table, grabbed his books, and stomped up the stairs.

She waited a few seconds then heard the bedroom door slam shut. Now, what was she going to do? She’d planned to tell him about the diagnosis; she’d decided that before she came home. Why had everything gone so wrong when she tried to talk to him? Not only did she have to decide about her health, she had her son to worry about, too.