
just three words

Athlete, Mother, Survivor.
How One Brave Woman
—Against All Odds—
Wins *the Race of Her Life*



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*“Before the world began, the Word was there. The Word was with God,
and the Word was God.”~ **John 1:1***

*“Your greatest self has been waiting your whole life; don't make it wait any longer.”
~ **Steve Maraboli***

AUTHOR'S INTRODUCTION

And so it begins: my untold story, now told. Not because I want to tell it, but because I had to. If I have learned anything, it is that God, who spoke the universe into existence, loves us unconditionally. He is the true author of our stories, united in the most amazing promise: whatever your circumstances are, there is great hope and great love for you— from God and those who are His hands and feet on earth —if you will only open your heart to it.

My prayer is that this book ignites your faith and helps you realize that often the greatest trials in our lives are in fact our greatest opportunities to grow and be transformed. And as you stand victorious, may you find your God-given gifts, your purpose here on earth, and share love and your experience with the world.

“He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.”

~ Revelation 21:4

“There is no greater agony than bearing an untold story inside you.”

~ Maya Angelou

PROLOGUE:

The Worst Day of my Life,

February 26, 2008

Rock bottom, that’s where I was. It’s only now that I realize I had to fall that far in order to be saved.

~ ~

Don’t do it again. Please, I am begging you, don’t do it.

My three sons and husband were lost in conversation at the table, oblivious to the **deathly war waging in my head. I wasn’t** truly present. Just pretending to be. My internal battle continued, the two opposing sides screaming for dominance. But at this point in my life, and especially today, the dark and tempting side kept winning.

I **observed the four of them. Each one held a piece of my heart. But it wasn’t** enough love to stop me.

I rose from the dinner table; the demon had won again.

The smile on my face was an imposter. As the “tormented mother” morphed into “Oscar-worthy actress,” I animatedly informed my husband Peter and my three sons, Stetson, Chase, and Trent—the children I had longed for all my life—that Mommy was going to be taking a well-deserved bubble bath. Could I please have twenty minutes of alone time? The voice in my head added, *So you can do what you promised never to do again, you liar!*

One last ditch effort from the redemptive side came:

How are you going to race for the United States in triathlon if you keep this up?

What about your upcoming lecture for National Nutrition month?

Your kids will never respect you!

I continued pushing my chair away, planning my casual exit so that no one would know how much urgency I actually felt. My fall from the cliff had happened months ago and I knew now that nothing could stop me. I was in a drag race at top speed, hurtling toward my demise, with no end in sight and no parachute to slow me down. Only a fiery crash and burn could end it all.

I left the table with a full bottle of water—something I would need to help me do **what I couldn't stop myself from doing. My boys took no notice of the bottle in my hand;** they had no experience identifying the telltale signs I gave off. Instead, I made it out **without arousing my family's suspicion,** and I quickly walked down the hall. I felt my shoulders slump as the weight of what I was about to do descended.

My hand covered the silver knob as I closed and locked the master bedroom door. In the bathroom, I turned on the hot water full force and then adjusted the cold. The sound of the tub filling up would wash away the retching, and I wanted the bath hot;

better to scald away the feelings of shame that I knew lay ahead.

Hurry! You don't have much time!

The food was already digesting and the thought was making me sicker. I tried to **convince myself that this really didn't count because I truly felt sick. But the truth was** apparent.

This was my eighth time today.

I pulled my long hair back into a ponytail so I wouldn't vomit on it. I took off my shirt and pants and stood naked as I gulped the 32 ounces of water. It would help get the food up and ease the pain. I looked at my fully distended stomach and gagged. ***How could a stomach get that big? I'd better get this over with.*** There was no turning back. I was committed and it was time.

Slowly I leaned forward, opened my mouth, and stuck my fingers down my throat. Everything was hurting. The glands in my neck were already swollen, my throat raw, and my knuckles were bleeding from the previous times I had bitten down on them, trying to push them deeper down my throat.

This time, it happened quickly, and soon a mound of food—spotted with blood—sat in the toilet, its high peak emerging from the water like a volcanic island.

How could all that have been in my stomach?

I crumbled to my knees. The voices in my mind vanished for a moment, the brain chemistry finally at peace.

The tub was almost full. Time was running out and I desperately needed to wash away my sin. I pulled myself off the floor and my practiced hands cleaned up everything quickly.

Before I stepped into the bubbles, I looked at myself in the mirror. Small broken

vessels had shown up under my eyes—broken from the power and pressure that comes with vomiting. A film of despair snuffed the light out of my pupils. It seemed it would take a little more work to hide this addiction. With the added years of life, my skin wasn't quite as resilient. Thank goodness I had concealer. I would need it to hide what I had done.

At last I stepped in and as I sunk deeper into the water, a dark cloud descended **on my spirits. The rush that I'd felt for just a moment after satisfying my vomit-fix** rapidly escaped. Frantically, I tried to wash away my guilt, my shame, my addiction; but I was unsuccessful. I let my head sink below the **water's surface and thought how nice it** would be to remain there forever, never having to face myself again. Nature eventually ruled and I rose to take a breath.

Tears rolled down my cheeks, popping the bubbles along with my dreams.

What the hell have you done, Karen?

Once again, I heard that faraway voice of redemption.

All right, tomorrow is a new day. You don't have to go back.

You never have to do this again. Today was just one big slip up.

You can get over it. Isn't that what you tell your clients?

Then, the voice of doom descended on my spirits again when I remembered I was supposed to be a role model.

You hypocrite! Everyone deserves better from you.

I winced. What a fool. I let the guilt-demon win again.

With the heaviest of hearts, I dried off, wrapped myself up in a robe, went to my bed, and got on my knees. I was done: done with this addiction that stole so much of my life, done pretending, done with living. My husband was worthy of so much more in a

wife, and my children needed a real mother, not a worthless hypocrite and a liar.

I lay my weary head in my hands, closed my eyes and said out loud, “**God**, please take me home. I am begging you.”

There was no point in living anymore. I’d reached rock bottom.

A knock on the door interrupted my prayer.

“Mommy, are you okay?”

All three boys were in the hallway, waiting and wondering. They must have tapped into the atmosphere that was soaked with despair. Perhaps it was crushing them, too.

I didn’t say anything, but thought as the knocking continued, *No, I’m almost dead. I’m anything but okay.*

“He rescues and He saves; He performs signs and wonders in the heavens and on the earth. He has rescued Daniel from the power of the lions.” ~ Daniel 6:27

“It is during our darkest moments that we must focus to see the light.”

~ Aristotle Onassis

CHAPTER 1: THE LION’S DEN

I wasn’t prepared. Who would be? It was Tuesday, March 18, 2008; twenty-one days after the worst day of my life. The precise time, 4:53 pm, is emblazoned in my mind because time seemed to stand still. Everything came into sharp focus: the lily about to bloom in its pot on the counter, the tree branches waving softly in the breeze as I glanced out the window, the picture slightly off-kilter on the wall, the dust on the black table. It was like a slow motion movie when I heard just three words that penetrated my world and changed my life forever.

“Karen, it’s cancer.”

My hand began to shake uncontrollably. I kept staring, looking at my fingers wrapped around the receiver as if they were attached to someone else. Survival instincts kicked in as I calmly asked, **“Are you sure?”**

The reply: “All five samples have cancer.”

In mere seconds, my brain sped through everything dear to me. Scenes of the happiest moments with my children rolled out as if I were an observer. I watched myself mother my three precious boys: Stetson in diapers, cautiously letting go of my hand for the first time; Chase always in motion, climbing, getting hurt, running to me for love only to run back out seeking adventure when his boo-boos were all better; Trent on my lap, pointing to pictures in a book, my heart flooding with both love and sadness that all of his milestones—learning to count, tie his shoes, ride a bike—would be **the last time I'd** get to teach my little boy all of those wonderful things about the world.

The most loving, tender moments with my husband filled my heart once again, from our first soaring kiss, to the heartbreak I felt when I thought I was breaking up with him forever, to the way he held my eyes when he wanted me to know he really **meant "I love you."** **Memories of my own childhood flitted through my brain: games with my brothers, my joy of running, Mom's loving embrace, the view of my tall dad's face looking down on me with pride.**

Going back to my teen and early college years, **however, wasn't so happy.** I thought of the way I struggled with homework; the way the ghost of death menaced me when I looked in the mirror; the lies I became used to telling; the veil of shame I became **accustomed to living under; the desperate ways I'd tried to both cover up my** inadequacies and appear like I had none.

In an instant, I felt the weight of the huge mistakes I'd made with my career, with men, and even with this breast lump that I so carelessly joked was God's way of giving me breast augmentation.

Everything traversed my brain in seconds as I tried to make sense of it all, wondering what had led to the years of misdiagnosis. Then the cold, hard fact seeped in.

It didn't matter how, or why. A killer was eating my body from the inside out.

I managed to replace the receiver, not sure how to proceed into the next minute, let alone with my life.

I had no choice but to come fully present again. Two sets of eyes were staring intently at me. I gazed down at the faces of our two youngest boys. Trent was nine, and his sparkling, pixie eyes and impish grin were now lost, his brow scrunched with concern. Thirteen-year-old Chase was usually my daredevil, but now I saw real fear in his eyes, already pooling with the tears he was trying to hold back. The loaded silence was too much for him, and a tension-filled wail escaped his mouth.

“Moouooooommy, what did they SAY?” He already knew. Instinct is a powerful thing.

As I told our boys something one never dreams of telling a child, Chase burst into tears and ran to his room, burying his face in the pillow. There was no time to think of **myself. Trent clung to my leg as I made my way into Chase's room. A gut-wrenching sob** shook his body. The sound was foreign to my ears. The pain cut me like a knife.

That warrior-mommy jumped into motion. Nothing can come between a mother **and her child. It's primal, part of our DNA. My whole focus was to *fix* this, *fight* this, *annihilate* this, and give our children hope. I just didn't know how hard “this” was going to be, and how drastically it would change my life.**

With Trent sitting wide-eyed on my lap, I stroked Chase's back, trying to instill into both of them the calm knowing that I was beginning to feel. ***I can do this. I will be fine. God is with me. My children will not be left without a mother.*** The story of Daniel

in the lion's den came to my mind. Daniel was saved from the harm of the lions because of his great faith. I felt God was telling me that this was my story too. If I walked in faith, I would be saved from this new lion that was staring me in the face.

I made a promise to the boys that I would fight, and I would keep my slot on Team USA and compete, just three months from now, in the Triathlon Age Group World Championships in Vancouver, BC. This was a promise I fully intended to keep, regardless of the monster that had just entered our world.

As Chase's sobs subsided, **a flood of early memories of mothering washed** through my mind: each of their births, gazing at their miraculous tiny bodies for the first time, the breastfeeding . . .

The cancer was in the boys' favorite breast, the left one, closest to my heart. Perhaps it was because they could hear my heartbeat as they nursed, a sound they had grown accustomed to in the womb. Maybe it was the angle of their head as we stared and marveled at one another, or maybe it was the fact that it always seemed to have just a bit more milk than the right one.

Whatever the reason, when **hunger called, it wasn't long before my baby boy was** latched on. Soon our eyes would meet and his mouth would widen into a grin, filling my heart with a love so great I thought it would burst.

When the world was asleep and it was just the two of us, I especially enjoyed this wonderful, God-given gift called motherhood.

As quickly as they came, the flood of peaceful memories suddenly receded, crashing up against the waves of doubt that entered my mind, jarring me back into the present. My new reality. And then, the tsunami of questions: ***How could this life-giving breast be killing me? What about the clean mammograms or the biopsy that just last***

year was negative? How could I have been misdiagnosed for so long? Was there an inner voice that I had missed in the commotion of my busy life?

After all, I had been complaining of feeling tired for no reason. You'd think after growing up in a physician's family, I'd have had the brains to get a second opinion. But honestly, the thought of *me* having cancer never really crossed my mind. I had forgotten that cancer doesn't discriminate. Everyone is up for grabs.

I needed space to think, **time to talk to God. But He'd have to wait. I had to go** about my business, get the boys to tennis, and make them proceed with life—forcing the three of us, for the time being, out of our shock.

I dropped them off, waving and smiling **as if we didn't have a care in the world.** My motherly instincts wanted desperately to protect them from the trial that awaited us. I had many years of practice pretending one thing while feeling entirely different on the inside. So waving and smiling was easy. Yet this time was different than all the others. It **wasn't about hiding my own secrets.** I thought I was giving the boys freedom to live care-free and without worry. But children are smart, and in time I learned it was much better to tell them the truth, because what they make up in their minds is often far worse than reality.

Chase and Trent ran off and I turned my thoughts to Peter. He needed to know my diagnosis. I wanted to tell him in person but he was scheduled to pick up the boys from tennis, and they would tell Peter about my cancer the second they saw him. I **couldn't risk that. The only choice I had was to call him on the phone before he got** home. He would be seated on the Metro North train, occupying an aisle seat if available. **I could see him in my mind's eye. Already my heart ached for him. His world was about** to change forever, too. I picked up the phone and dialed.

My heart pounded as I waited for Peter to answer his cell phone. On the third ring, he picked up. When I heard his voice, I hesitated. He could tell immediately that I **wasn't my typical jovial self. *Here goes***, I thought. My voice cracked a bit as I said, **"Honey, I have cancer and it doesn't look good."** Shock, silence. What could he say? The **unspoken love and fear hung between us. At last he composed himself. "I love you."**

"I love you, too."

I hung up with Peter. I knew he was crying. After all the years together, I could feel it. Regrettably, there was nothing I could do but wait until he came home. Then we could embrace. How long did we have? Weeks, months, or the rest of our lives? As quickly as that thought entered my head, I pushed it out. I just couldn't go there right now.

I would tell my oldest son, Stetson, in person an hour from now, when I was due to pick him up from Greenwich High School. As much as I dreaded rocking his **world, I was grateful I'd be able to tell him face to face. My parents, siblings,** and other friends and family would have to hear the news later.

What have I done? What in the world am I going to do now?

When I got home, I wandered quietly around the house. The walls felt like they were caving in on me. **For years I'd had a horrible,** repetitive dream where the buildings all around me were crumbling and crashing down as I desperately tried to escape them. **Today my nightmare was real. I couldn't stay in the house a second longer. I simply had** to get out, and quickly.