

“*Divine Secrets of the Ta-Ta Sisterhood* keeps it REAL! You will find yourself laughing and crying at the same time. A must read for women in all stages of breast cancer.”

—Mary H. Carson, RN, OCW

“This is just downright awesome. I love the humor...divine secrets are perfect!”

—Krysti Hughett, Young Survival Coalition

“*Housewives of Anywhere*, look out! There’s nothing more real than hearing the words: *you have breast cancer*. A must to read and share!”

—Carole L. Sanek, RN, Director of *Breast Cancer Wellness*
Ambassador Program

“Joanna Chapman’s open and honest approach helps to answer key questions for a woman newly diagnosed with breast cancer. It’s like going to a neighbor’s house and talking it out over tea...it makes a scary situation less intimidating.”

—Lisa Grey, author of the *Pink Kitchen* cookbook series

“Engaging writing style that absorbs the reader..Your book gave me a safe place to cry, to process feelings and give them voice...to reaffirm the strength of my human spirit.”

—Betty Vitek, cancer survivor

“Keen insight into the life of a cancer patient. Hilarious, heartbreaking, insightful...with wicked wit and endearing charm and compassion.”

—Gail C. Moore, cancer survivor

Divine Secrets of the Ta-Ta Sisterhood

Pledging the Pink Sorority

Joanna Chapman



Cosmic Casserole Press ♦ Concord, NC

DIVINE SECRETS OF THE TA-TA SISTERHOOD: PLEDGING THE PINK SORORITY

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Cosmic Casserole Press...Serving up Honesty, Humor, and Hope

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Some names and identifying details of people described in this book have been changed to protect their privacy. While this book is based upon my actual experiences, my memory is less than perfect. Any errors are unintentional. For narrative flow, some timeframes have been compressed and some conversations condensed.

The information in this book is intended to offer a personal recollection of breast cancer. This book is not intended to serve as any sort of medical advice. The author and publisher specifically disclaim any and all liability arising directly from information shared in this book. Consult a health care professional regarding your specific situation.

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Dedication

*To my sweet husband,
who definitely stood by me
“for better or worse;
in sickness and in health.”*

*To my amazing mother,
who dropped everything to come
help our family
whenever we needed her.*

*To my circle of friends and family,
who delivered casseroles,
mailed care packages,
and kept me laughing
even during dark and scary times.*

*To all my pink sorority sisters,
near and far, optimistic or discouraged.
Sending you warm thoughts.
Still hoping and praying for a cure.*



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Prologue: Extradited to Cancerland



Welcome to the Ta-Ta Sisterhood

Maybe you, or someone you love, just became a member of the “pink sorority” nobody wants to join. Perhaps you noticed a lump while showering or were called back after your mammogram. Maybe you have a strong family history of cancer and have been dreading the day you too might be diagnosed. Statistics say one out of every eight women will face breast cancer in her lifetime. Even if you never wrestle with the beast yourself, chances are someone you know and love will.

Regardless of circumstances, you are now a pledge of the Ta-Ta Sisterhood. Take my hand and I’ll be your big sister, guiding you through the initiation rites of treatment and healing. Frankly, I’d rather have joined a sorority known for great keg parties. Let me turn the hospital sheet into a toga and spend my time in candlelit ceremonies, repeating obscure Latin mottoes. If I’m going to throw up, let it be caused by too much “trashcan punch” instead of chemo drugs.

But it is what it is: I’m a five-year survivor of breast cancer. Stick with me and I’ll tell you the truth not everyone else will. Like, it’s okay to hate all the Pepto-Bismol-pink knick-knacks. That treatment decisions can be perplexing. That your friends and family will need a “Stupid Pass” for their well-meaning but clueless comments.

I get annoyed with Pollyanna-ish survivors who say their cancer was a gift. If it's a gift, it's a tacky, passive-aggressive one, like Depends and Dentu-Creme wrapped up in sparkly black paper for a milestone birthday. I didn't need cancer to teach me a life lesson. Even so, the experience wasn't completely negative. Important relationships grew stronger. I stumbled over things to laugh about in the most unexpected places, my wacky and irreverent perspective carrying me through the toughest times.

While undergoing treatment, I'd get frustrated when I read a book or watched a movie with a surprising cancer plot twist. Never mind that Julia Roberts or Winona Ryder or whoever always looked lovely in their last moments, with suspiciously dewy complexions. Let me assure you that my story—blending elements of horror, suspense, and romance—has a happy ending, eventually.

I once was a fairly private person, but cancer has knocked down my emotional barriers. Maybe someday I'll be mortified about over-sharing, but if the disclosure of my breast cancer journey—and the unexpected secrets I've learned—can help another pink sorority gal, then it will be worthwhile. Therefore, I humbly offer you my story as a cosmic casserole, a cheesy comfort food, served up to you, my Ta-Ta Sisters, with honesty and humor, hoping it will make you laugh, cry, smile, and feel less alone.

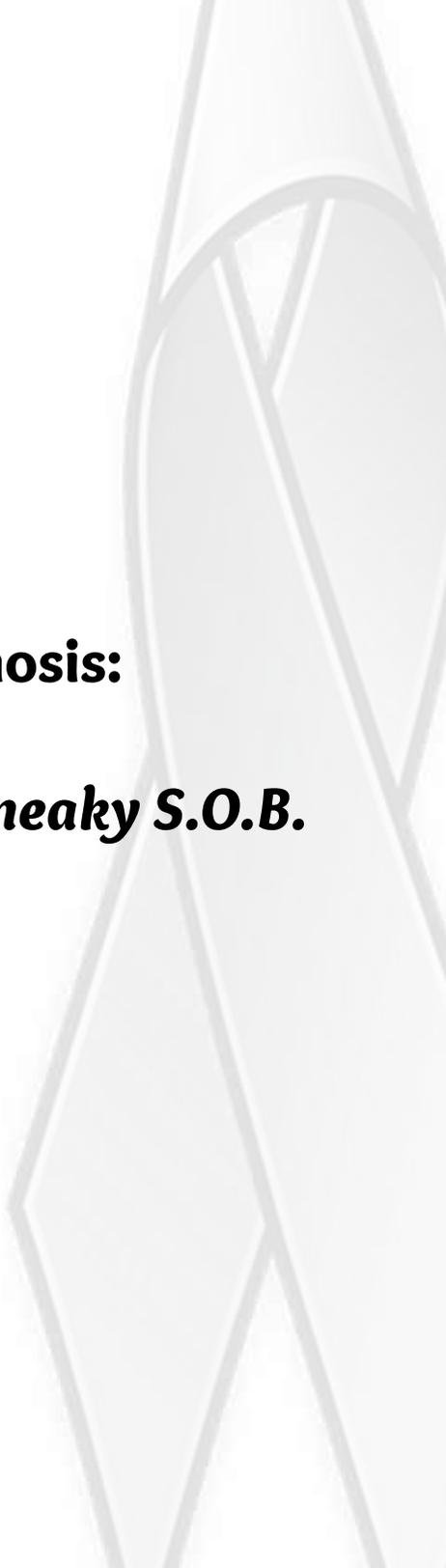
I know we've been burned by unreliable memoirs in the past, so I promise I'll tell it to you straight, offered up raw and close to the bone, not deep-Frey-ed or sugar-sprinkled. But my mind is no steel trap; it's more like a stretchable aluminum Slinky. I probably won't get every detail right—maybe I *was* drinking a margarita rather than a piña colada when I had my epiphany about life's meaning on the top deck of a cruise ship. As a work of creative narrative nonfiction, the book's plot twists and turns are factual, though viewed through a subjective lens. At times my memory may be more impressionistic smudge than high-definition digital photo. But unlike the author who told readers he'd undergone a root canal without pain killers or anesthesia,

I won't claim to have performed my own mastectomy with a bottle of tequila and a Swiss Army knife.

If you're looking to me for medical advice, then you probably think Captain Kangaroo and Colonel Sanders work at the Pentagon. *Big mistake!* Consult your own physician for treatment recommendations. Also, while I've included the names of websites, books, small businesses, and nonprofits that I (or trusted friends) have found helpful, your mileage may vary.

As my Rock Star Surgeon likes to say, "You don't deal the cards—all you can do is play the hand you're dealt." Only a few years ago, I found myself at a high-stakes table, playing for my life. Take a seat, Ta-Ta Sisters, and I'll share a few of my trusty card tricks. *Game on.*

June 2013



Diagnosis:

Cancer is a Sneaky S.O.B.



Trouble in Paradise

July 2007

I lean back in the lounge chair, frozen strawberry daiquiri in hand. The ocean breeze at Hilton Head is refreshing, and I can hear the soothing sounds of the waves. Yet I'm anything but relaxed and content. Behind my dark sunglasses, I'm staring at other women's breasts more intently than a hormone-addled teenage boy.

I have breast cancer. Everything is different now.

Cancer can be one sneaky S.O.B. It's freaky how it can creep up on you without warning. There I was, a 45-year-old multi-tasking mom, feeling great, no worries...while underneath it all, malignant cells were stealthily multiplying. There was no lump, no pain, no outward sign to warn me that my life would change forever. If I hadn't gone for that annual routine mammogram—a few months overdue—the cancer would have continued to spread its tentacles, silent and menacing, for who knows how long.

Here I sit at this lovely beach resort, for what was *supposed* to be a relaxing, romantic, anniversary trip. Instead, I'm tormented by



Divine Secret: Everything can change in an instant.

All it takes is one phone call, one conversation, one appointment. Suddenly, life as you know it turns upside down.

anxious thoughts and tense muscles while questions multiply in my mind. I have a confirmed diagnosis of breast cancer and do not yet know my recommended treatment or prognosis.

Will I lose my hair? Will I lose my breasts? Will I lose my life?



Pieces of Me

June 2007

My Pink Sisterhood story really started several weeks earlier, when our family was at Myrtle Beach, less than two hundred miles from Hilton Head, yet separated by a universe of differences. Hilton Head is an upscale oasis of chardonnay and polo shirts, live jazz and bike paths. Myrtle Beach is a mass-market nirvana of mini-golf parks and cheap souvenir shops selling hermit crabs, beer bong, and Confederate flag bikinis. Instead of the ocean view of Hilton Head, our room at Myrtle Beach had overlooked a parking lot.

Nick, age 11, was playing in a basketball tournament at Myrtle, so we'd brought Alex, 14, and Larissa, 5, to turn it into a family vacation. In between games, we splashed in the hotel pool and hunted for seashells on the beach.

One afternoon, en route to yet another sweaty gym, I remembered to check my voicemail. After spending a dozen years as a stay-at-home mom, I'd recently gone back to work and started a grant-consulting business. In between messages left by friends and business prospects, there was a call from the breast imaging center asking me to come back for additional mammogram films.

Although I can be a hypochondriac and have several times googled myself into thinking I had some rare tropical disease,