

KELLY YANG

Private
LABEL



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First Edition

Author's Note

On Oct 5, 2020, my world got turned upside down when my mom called me with the most shocking news—she was turning yellow.

She was in Hong Kong at the time and I was in the United States. She first noticed it in her skin and thought she was just getting a little tanned. But when she went to see her doctor, he suspected pancreatic cancer. I was shocked. One minute, she was perfectly healthy, eating Chinese cabbage and doing tai chi in the park. The next minute, she's in the emergency room, fighting for her life.

The ensuing few months were the most intense, dramatic months ever as her body wrestled with the cancer, and I wrestled with the very real possibility that I might lose my mom. I jumped on the first flight back to Hong Kong. Hong Kong had one of the world's strictest quarantine orders at the time, and I sat through mandatory hotel quarantine for fourteen days with my son while my mom was undergoing the Whipple procedure, one of the toughest operations on the planet. I was not allowed to leave my hotel room. I had to wear an electronic wrist monitor. I could see her hospital from my hotel—I was just steps away, *so close*. Every day, I'd put my hand to the window, hoping, praying that she'd still be there by the time I came out. All I wanted was to hug my mom again.

Finally, they let me out of the hotel. Tears streamed down my face when I finally got to hug my mom. She had survived the surgery!

Then the other shoe dropped—during the surgery, they discovered she had one of the rarest and worst types of pancreatic cancer, one associated with a very poor prognosis. My heart sank when I heard this. Like Serene in the story, my mother is my best friend. She's the first person I call when something good happens to me. She's the only person who knows how I'm feeling with just a look. She's my rock. And the idea of not having her anymore . . . not having my *rock* . . . terrifies me beyond words.

But I wasn't giving up. And neither was my mom. I researched doctors and on the recommendation of an old classmate, found the incredible oncologist Dr. William Isacoff in Los Angeles, who had a reputation for thinking outside the box. He told us to come to LA for chemotherapy. It was not easy convincing my mom to come back to the United States with me in December 2020, let alone to move to Los Angeles, the epicenter of Covid at the time. There were no vaccines available yet. I'd be taking my mom, who was extremely weak and vulnerable after the surgery, from a place with zero Covid cases to a place with almost 20,000 per day. But I felt it was the best chance we had of surviving this thing.

And so, on that cold, dreary day, December 13, 2020, I boarded the aircraft back to California with my mom, dad, and daughter, Nina. I left the boys with my husband, who was still working in Hong Kong at the time. As a mother, the decision to separate from two of my kids during a pandemic was one of the hardest decisions I had to make. But I was also a daughter, trying to help save my mom's life. And I knew that having all three kids with me, without my spouse, and no in-person school, would

make it very hard for me to focus on my mom.

So we said our goodbyes. That day at the airport, we all wept as my son Tilden hugged his lao lao and pleaded with her to still be alive by the time he came over to the US again. We didn't know when that was going to be. We genuinely did not know whether we were all going to see each other again.

Somehow, we made it onto the flight and moved to Los Angeles. The next six months were a grueling roller-coaster ride of good news, bad news, chemotherapy, immunotherapy, CT scans, blood tests, genetic sequencing, and many, *many* trips to the doctor. I threw myself into the process, going to every doctor's meeting, researching every drug, thinking if I just worked hard enough, I could somehow control it.

But cancer's not like a character in one of my books. I can't control it.

Cancer has a mind of its own.

Just like love.

And that's when Serene and Lian came to me. Writing this love story, about bravery, about not giving up even when you're facing life's most terrifying storm, about a complicated but unbreakable mother-daughter bond, helped me get through this terrifying time. Helped me be the rock to my mom that she's been to me my whole life, through the ups and the downs. Helped us both find the laughter and the joy, again, and celebrate each day as it comes—which is the best way to live life, cancer or no cancer. That's what this whole journey has taught me.

As I write this, it's been a year since my mother's diagnosis. She's doing well, and she's still in treatment. I do not know what her prognosis is, and neither does she nor anyone else. But we're all living life to its fullest, and that's what matters. The rest of my

family finally joined us in Los Angeles in the spring and summer of 2021. And Tilden finally got his wish—we all clung to each other in the most joyous hug.

Sometimes when you're in the eye of the storm, the best thing to do is hold each other and hang on tight.

Thank you for reading the love story that helped heal my heart.

For more information on pancreatic cancer and to understand the warning signs, please visit the Pancreatic Cancer Action Network at pancan.org.

For patient stories about living and thriving with pancreatic cancer, please visit Let's Win! Pancreatic Cancer at letswinpc.org.

To donate to the funding of scientific and clinical research of pancreatic cancer, please visit the Lustgarten Foundation at lustgarten.org.



Kelly hugging her mother after
getting out of hotel quarantine,
Hong Kong, November 2020



Tilden, Kelly's son, hugging his grandmother before her flight to the US, December 2020



Kelly with her mother in Los Angeles, November 2021



Kelly writing *Private Label* in the doctor's office while her mother gets chemotherapy, March 2021