Hope, Humour, and
Persistent Little #%&@ers!

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A Memoir of Life, Cancer, and Other Unscheduled Detours

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Truth, tenacity, and a touch of chaos

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Some days you design the life you want.

Other days you design around the
flaming wheelie bin of chaos.

Either way, it is still yours – and that matters.

Kerry Buchanan

To my two incredible kids, Hana and Callum.

You fill my soul with joy, light, and love.

You are wonderful human beans!

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Preface

Warning: May Contain Hope and Swearing

Hobbies include reframing medical doom and roasting existential dread.

Let's get this out of the way up front:

I'm not cured. I'm still being treated. And I'm about to roll into chemo infusion #40 like it's just another item on my to-do list. ('Groceries, laundry, cytotoxins …')

Stage 4 cancer isn't the plot twist I saw coming – but here we are.

This book isn't told from the mountaintop of remission or some post-cancer zen garden. It's written right from the messy middle. The place where scans are suspense novels, blood results are surprise reveals, and hope is a muscle you flex daily.

But here's the thing: this isn't just a cancer memoir. No one needs another tragic tale told in hushed tones.

This a perspective shifter. A bit of comic relief, served with strategy, scars, and salty snacks.

You'll find lessons I never asked for. Hacks for holding on. Honest thoughts from infusion chairs, hospital beds, garden centres, and the occasional existential spiral. You'll meet some persistent little #%&@ers (my tumours), and the unicorn surgeons who went after them with surgical jazz hands.

You'll also meet me – the curious, feisty, design-thinking nerd who decided if I was going to ride this rollercoaster, I might as well take notes.

I've spent decades solving problems with empathy, creativity, and a slightly obsessive love of good process. And when cancer bulldozed its way into my life, I used those same tools to stay afloat.

Purpose. Micro-moments. Reframing. Humour. Hope.

They matter.

Whether you're someone who's unwell, someone who loves someone who's unwell, or just a human being trying to make sense of this mad, beautiful life – there's something in here for you.

So. Deep breath. Shoes off. Come on in.

This is not a guide to surviving cancer. It's a guide to staying you – even when the wheels come off.

Welcome. I'm ridiculously glad you're here.

PART 1

Welcome to the Wild Ride

This collection kicks off the story of my personal cancer journey – the awkward, unpredictable, occasionally absurd rollercoaster I never queued up for, but somehow found myself riding anyway (without a seatbelt, might I add). From those first strange symptoms to the diagnosis that changed everything, and through surgeries, treatments, and moments of sheer disbelief – it's all here.

Told with honesty, grit, and a healthy dose of dark humour (because sometimes if you don't laugh, you cry … or throw something), these chapters are less about perfect inspiration and more about real life. The messy, beautiful, laugh-out-loud-in-the-chemo-chair kind.

Whether you're living with cancer or supporting someone who is, I'm sending you strength, solidarity, and a few solid belly laughs. I hope you find something in these pages that helps you feel a little more seen, a little more hopeful, and a lot less alone.

So, buckle up. There may be unexpected turns, questionable metaphors, and possibly a few too many references to bodily functions – but hey, that's cancer for you.

Aliens and Pat Benatar

"Oh."

I pause briefly.

I'd seen the gnarly red mass on the screen during the procedure; it didn't look right.

Is that my heart pounding in my head?

My gastroenterologist has brought in a nurse – backup, I guess – for the moment he breaks the news.

"Okay, so what do we do next?" I ask.

Is he slightly startled by my reply?

"Well, I've taken a biopsy, you're already booked in for CT and MRI scans, so I'll refer you to a surgeon to discuss tumour removal as quickly as possible," he says.

"Great. Let's do it," I say, like I've just seen a Nike ad.

He gives me the photos he took of my insides.

They look like a massive, mucousy mouth ulcer. Charming.

I'm pretty sure this is the kind of footage they use to storyboard Alien movies.

Does he sleep well, I wonder?

I walk out of the hospital holding my glossy horror-shots like a party bag from a very bad theme park.

I jump in my car – yes, yes, I know, light sedative and all that. But it's only 800 metres to my house.

I call my partner.

"Hi, how did it go?" he asks.

"Well … I've got cancer."

Silence.

More silence.

"I'm so sorry," he says softly.

I relay the gory details. The tumour. The fast-track referral. The medical photos that belong in a sci-fi horror archive.

And the plan, as it stands – for now.

So that was the day everything changed.

Or maybe it didn't. I still had to get groceries for dinner. The dog still needed walking. My son was on his way home from school, and my daughter would be calling from university soon with her latest flat drama. Life, annoyingly – or maybe reassuringly – refused to pause.

But here's the thing: so much of what helped me get through this storm didn't start with a diagnosis. It started long before, in the quiet and not-so-quiet bits of my life.

I was lucky enough to be brought up by two very inspiring parents. They would never acknowledge this description, not even now in their mid-80s and early 90s, it was so ingrained in them both to just get stuff done with what you had on hand. A generational thing born out of post-World War II necessity. I think the saying is something like 'tough times make diamonds'.

Baking, sewing, knitting, gardening, fixing water pipes, fencing, crafting all sorts of wooden furniture and even a number of boats! The knack!

Knowing how to work stuff out before the time of the internet. Trying,

failing fast, and then trying again. Failure was all part of the learning process – not something to be afraid of.

In my own career I'd spent the better part of 33 years solving complex problems in the world of information technology – project management, business analysis, and user-centred process design. If there was a system, I wanted to understand it. If it was broken, I wanted to fix it. And if it didn't make sense to humans, I wanted to redesign it until it did.

I've always loved a challenge – puzzles, strategy games, anything that tested my brain or made me just a little bit competitive. I've lived across the globe – Norway, the USA, England, Australia, and even a chapter in Central America, where I picked up Spanish and a taste for adventure. Curiosity wasn't just part of my personality – it was my way of engaging with the world. Big ideas, small details – I wanted to know why, and how, and what next?

Nature has always been my place to breathe. Forests. Flower gardens. A paddock of grass. Or drifting in water – which, for the record, is great for swimming and terrible for drinking. I've always hated drinking water. That particular detail will become far more relevant than I ever expected.

So no, I wasn't prepared for cancer. But I was prepared for something. For asking questions. For figuring things out. For reframing the problem. For fighting when I had to, and adapting when I didn't.

And apparently, for drinking litres of water whether I liked it or not.

For those of you pondering your own health – let me just say this: I didn't have any of the typical colon cancer symptoms.

No bleeding. No unexplained weight loss – quite the opposite, actually.

My iron was low-ish but still 'within range'.

And as for toilet habits? Well, I've always had a precocious stomach that's demanded one fully-leaded coffee every morning just to get moving. That wasn't new.

If you're thinking cancer always comes with flashing red lights and sirens – it doesn't. Sometimes it's more like a slow leak in a back tyre. You notice the drag, but you keep on driving.

Was I expecting cancer?

Not exactly. But I'd been feeling 'not right' for at least two years.

I completed the Kinloch Off-Road Half Marathon – a beautiful but demanding course that starts in Kinloch, on the shores of Lake Taupō. From there, it climbs up into the range, drops down to the range head, cuts across to Whakaipo Bay, and loops back again. I loved it. And for my first half marathon, I did pretty well.

But partway through the race, I noticed something odd – my arms had started to swell. The swelling continued through to the finish line. I felt fine otherwise, but just to be safe, I headed straight to the medic tent after crossing the line. The medics were alarmed and immediately gave me fluids and put me under observation.

By the end of the weekend, the swelling had subsided. It was a curious reaction – one I'd never experienced before. But it didn't stop there. From that point on, it became a pattern. Every time I did strenuous activity, the swelling returned.

Three months before I was diagnosed, my partner suggested we walk to the summit of Mount Titiraupenga in the Pureora Forest, nestled in the Waikato region. I'd been feeling unusually fatigued, and the idea was that some fresh forest air and exercise would do me good. It's only 6.4 kilometres, with a vertical climb of 800 metres – barely taxing, or so I told myself.

We set off in good spirits. The track started gently, winding through lush native bush. But as the gradient steepened and the path began its relentless zigzag upward, I started to run out of steam. Every zig, and every zag, was a mountain in itself. My legs felt like concrete, and each step became a conscious act of will. I was questioning my fitness, my stamina, and – if I'm honest – myself.