

*Uncorrected Advance Reader Copy

In the Mirror

By Kaira Rouda

Warning: Prompt medical attention is critical for adults as well as children, even if you do not notice any symptoms.

Chapter 1

Rolling over to get out of bed, I caught a glimpse of myself in the mirror and cringed. My reflection said it all. Everything had changed.

I looked like death.

I blinked, moving my gaze from the mirror, and noticed the calendar. It was Monday again. That meant everything in the real world. It meant groaning about the morning and getting the kids off to school. It meant struggling to get to the office on time and then forcing yourself to move through the day. It meant the start of something new and fresh and undetermined. But Mondays meant nothing at Shady Valley. We lived in the “pause” world, between “play” and “stop.” Suspension was the toughest part for me. And loneliness. Sure, I had visitors, but it wasn’t the same as being surrounded by people in motion. I’d been on fast-forward in the real world, juggling two kids and my business, struggling to stay connected to my husband, my friends. At Shady Valley, with beige-colored day after cottage-cheese-tasting day, my pace was, well –

I had to get moving.

I supposed my longing for activity was behind my rather childish wish to throw a party for myself. At least it gave me a mission of sorts. A delineation of time beyond what the latest in a long line of cancer treatments dictated. It had been more than 18 months of treatments, doctor's appointments, hospitalizations and the like. I embraced the solidity of a deadline. The finality of putting a date on the calendar and knowing that at least this, my party, was something I could control.

I noticed the veins standing tall and blue and bubbly atop my pale, bony hands. I felt a swell of gratitude for the snakelike signs of life, the entry points for experimental treatments; without them, I'd be worse than on pause by now.

I pulled my favorite blue sweatshirt over my head and tugged on my matching blue sweatpants.

Moving at last, I brushed my teeth and then headed next door to Ralph's. He was my best friend at Shady Valley—a special all-suite, last-ditch-effort experimental facility for the sick and dying—or at least he had been until I began planning my party. I was on his last nerve with this, but he'd welcome the company, if not the topic. He was paused too.

My thick cotton socks helped me shuffle across my fake wood floor, but it was slow going once I reached the grassy knoll—the leaf-green carpet that had overgrown the hallway. An institutional attempt at Eden, I supposed. On our good days, Ralph and I sometimes sneaked my son's plastic bowling set out there to partake in vicious

matches. We had both been highly competitive, type-A people in the “real” world and the suspended reality of hushed voices and tiptoeing relatives was unbearable at times.

“I’ve narrowed it down to three choices,” I said, reaching Ralph’s open door. “Please come celebrate my life on the eve of my death. RSVP immediately. I’m running out of time.”

“Oh, honestly,” Ralph said, rolling his head back onto the pillows propping him up. I knew my time in Shady Valley was only bearable because of this man, his humanizing presence. Even though we both looked like shadows of our outside, real-world selves, we carried on a relationship as if we were healthy, alive. I ignored the surgery scars on his bald, now misshapen head. He constantly told me I was beautiful. It worked for us.

“Too morbid? How about: ‘Only two months left. Come see the incredible, shrinking woman. Learn diet secrets of the doomed,’” I said, smiling then, hoping he’d join in.

“Jennifer, give it a rest would you?” Ralph said.

“You don’t have to be so testy. Do you want me to leave?” I asked, ready to retreat back to my room.

“No, come in. Let’s just talk about something else, OK, beautiful?”

Ralph was lonely, too. Friends from his days as the city’s most promising young investment banker had turned their backs—they didn’t or couldn’t make time for

his death. His wife, Barbara, and their three teenage kids were his only regular visitors. Some days, I felt closer to Ralph than to my own family, who seemed increasingly more absorbed in their own lives despite weekly flowers from Daddy and dutiful visits from Henry, my husband of six years. Poor Henry. It was hard to have meaningful visits at Shady Valley, with nurses and treatments and all manner of interruptions. We still held hands and kissed, but intimacy—even when I was feeling up to it—was impossible.

So, there we were, Ralph and I, two near-death invalids fighting for our lives and planning a party to celebrate that fact. It seemed perfectly reasonable, at least to me, because while I knew I should be living in the moment, the future seemed a little hazy without a party to focus on.

“Seriously, I need input on my party invitations. It’s got to be right before I hand it over to Mother. I value your judgment, Ralph; is that too much to ask?”

“For God’s sake, let me see them.” Ralph snatched the paper out of my hand. After a moment, he handed it back to me. “The last one’s the best. The others are too, well, self-pitying and stupid. Are you sure you can’t just have a funeral like the rest of us?”

I glared at him, but agreed, “That’s my favorite, too.”

*Mr. & Mrs. E. David Wells
request your presence at a
celebration in honor of their daughter
Jennifer Wells Benson
Please see insert for your party time
Shady Valley Center
2700 Hocking Ridge Road*

RSVP to Mrs. Juliana Duncan Wells
No gifts please—donations to breast cancer research appreciated.
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At first, I had been incredibly angry about the cancer. Hannah's birth, so joyous, had marked the end of my life as a "normal" person. Apparently, it happened a lot. While a baby's cells multiplied, the mom's got into the act, mutating, turning on each other. Hannah was barely two weeks old when I became violently ill. My fever was 105 degrees when we arrived in the ER. I think the ER doctors suspected a retained placenta or even some sort of infectious disease, although I was so feverish I can't remember much from that time. All I remember was the feeling of being cut off from my family—Henry, two-year-old Hank, and newborn Hannah—and marooned on the maternity ward, a place for mothers-to-be on bed rest until their due dates. That was hell.

At 33, I was a pathetic sight. My headache was so intense the curtains were drawn at all times. I didn't look pregnant anymore, so all the nurses thought my baby had died. That first shift tip-toed around me, murmuring. By the second night, one of them posted a sign: "The baby is fine. Mother is sick." It answered their questions since I couldn't. It hurt my head too much to try.

By the third day, my headache had receded to a dull roar. Surgery revealed that there was no retained placenta after all. I was ready to go home to my newborn and my life. So with a slight fever and no answers, I escaped from the hospital and went home to a grateful Henry and a chaotic household. I was weak and tired, but

everyone agreed that was to be expected. I thanked God for the millionth time for two healthy kids and my blessed, if busy, life.

And then, not two weeks later, I found the lump.

Not a dramatic occurrence, really, at least not at first. I was shaving under my arm, and I happened to bump into my left breast with my hand. I could feel an odd mass that hadn't been there before. When I pushed on the top part of my breast, closest to my underarm, it hurt. I freaked out and called for Henry.

"I'm sure it's fine," he reassured me while his eyes revealed his own fears. "We'll make an appointment to have it checked out first thing tomorrow, OK?"

Our eyes locked then, and in that moment, I think we both knew.

It wasn't, of course, fine. When the radiologist at the Women's Imaging Center read the mammogram, she called my doctor right away. The solid, spider-webby mass had tentacles spreading through my left breast. Deadly, dangerous tentacles full of cancerous cells. Surgery confirmed that what I had felt was a malignant mass that had already begun to metastasize to my lymph nodes. They moved me to the cancer floor and began treatments immediately, and that's where I'd been, in body or spirit, for more than a year.

Ralph was the one to describe them as "circle mouths": the initial reactions of family and friends expressing sympathy for our rotten luck. When the doctors finally figured out what was wrong with me, my family was the first to respond with their

blank stares and circle mouths. “OOOOOO, Jennifer, we’re sOOOOOO sorry.” But, really, what else could we expect? Before I had cancer, I know I probably reacted the same way.

Initially, I was caught up in the angry stage of grief, enveloped by it. It ate away at my soul and left me spent with useless emotion. Why me? What had I done differently than anyone else I knew? Did I drink too many Diet Cokes? Eat too much McDonald’s? Did I live downstream from a pesticide runoff? Was I a bad person? Why didn’t my children deserve to grow up with a mother? Why? Exhausted by remorse, I eventually found myself safely encased in quasi-acceptance that wrapped around me like a blanket, smoldering the dreams of middle- and old age, and draping the vision of my children as teenagers and adults, tamping out hope.

Hope. I knew my family thought the party was a sign that I had given up, that I was welcoming death, maybe even hastening it a bit by my bold invitation. And yet, hope to me was just another four-letter word without substance. I needed a reason to hang on, to continue what had become a painful and tedious daily struggle. For me, the best thing about life was the people in it. Friends, lovers, teachers, role models—they all made me the person I had become. I needed to reconnect with the living if only for a single night, to be assured my life had meant something and I was not as forgotten as I felt in my institutional isolation. No, the party was not a sign of lost hope, but the opposite—a desperate gathering of the people from my past, as if each held a piece of some cosmic puzzle that could be reconfigured into something whole—and healthy. Hope.

“It looks nice, Jennifer, really,” Ralph said, jarring me from my reverie. “Why are your parents hosting it, though? Why not you and Henry?”

“Ah, because Juliana Duncan Wells would never forgive me if I denied her the chance to host a party. She’s a professional hostess, you know.”

Ralph chuckled weakly. His brown eyes were lifeless, tired. I inspected his pale, thin, worn face more closely. His head, which had been shaved and cut open for multiple surgeries, was now more lumpy and grooved with scars than round. He was an attractive man, but he had a prominent dent over his left eye, swooping to his ear. My scars were tucked away inside my cozy sweatshirt. My head was newly covered in short curly blonde hair. It had been straight before chemo.

I looked away and asked, “What’s wrong today, Ralph? You look really sad. New meds?” Ralph’s room sported the same fake leather chairs arranged around an imitation wood table that mine did. His naugahyde was burgundy; mine was brown. Other than that, our rooms were identical, with green-striped walls and white wicker stands on either side of white bedside tables; a fake cheeriness that tried to mask the anguish of the patients who resided here. I made my slow trek to one of the chairs and sank into it.

“It’s nothing, Jennifer, really,” Ralph answered unconvincingly, clasping his thin hands together on his stomach. I noticed he had moved his platinum wedding band to his middle left finger.

I knew he was lying, but I also knew enough not to pry. Ralph Waldo Erickson—his real name, and his parents knew better—had discovered cancer when he felt a pain in his right cheek while shaving. He had a headache, too, both of which his doctor dismissed as a sinus infection when he first called. A few days later, he woke screaming in the middle of the night, and was rushed to the ER, where an MRI revealed a malignant growth the size of a lemon. On the operating table, the skin of his face was pulled to the side while the doctors cut out the tumor. Success—until they found more tumors. And more still, after radiation, after chemo. He was forty-five years old.

Six months earlier, he'd had a headache. Now, he had four months, tops.

After a few minutes of silence, he suddenly asked, "Did you know it's the fall harvest?" with his eyes sparkling and his hands gesturing in front of him. "I mean, all those years I drank wine—loved wine—and I didn't even take the time to learn about it. You know, learn how they make it, when they pick the grapes. God, that's sad. They're out there right now, in California, France, even Ohio for God's sake, just outside our windows, and I never bothered to learn a thing about it. Sure, I did the touristy winery hop in Napa and Sonoma a time or two. But, this is harvest season! The most beautiful time of the year, and I never bothered to be a part of it—you know?" Ralph finished and looked up at the ceiling, clasping his hands again. I'd never noticed how long his fingers were before.

"So, add it to our list, Buddy, OK?" I said, gently, knowing it wouldn't really help, knowing the impossibility of Ralph ever leaving Shady Valley, much less visiting

Napa Valley for the harvest. “Hey, it’s treatment time. I need to go back. Buzz me when you feel like it.”

Ralph didn’t answer, and I didn’t really expect him to. We all went through depressions at Shady Valley, triggered by almost anything: harvest time, or an especially beautiful orange-purple sunset. It was hard to keep your spirits up all the time. He’d be fine in a little while.

I made my way slowly back across the slick floor and padded down the thick green carpet back into my room. Promptly at four, Nurse Hadley arrived with her arsenal of vials and needles, all part of a new therapy I was determined to try.

“Well, aren’t we pretty in blue,” she said, as if speaking to a child.

“My veins do look stunning today,” I agreed. Her eyes darted to mine and then away. *Heck, they are nice veins*, I thought, as I prepared to receive the latest experimental drug with a mixture of dread and barely detectable hope. The side effects might be hell—but still, this could be the one.

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The shrill ring of my industrial-sized speakerphone woke me up. Caller ID revealed it was my business partner, Jacob DuPry. I had faxed him the invitation choices, knowing he’d have an opinion.

“I’m positive you should have no more than two reception times. Period. And you know I love the idea of the party,” Jacob said, exhaling loudly into the phone. I

imagined him pushing his blonde bangs to the right with the palm of his left hand. A signature move. “I wish Randolph or Patrick had thought about it before they succumbed. Too late. You have more friends than they did, though. Their death receptions would’ve appealed simply to the curious, beyond me. But you—well with the Loop’s customers alone, you’ll fill the place.”

Jacob was heir apparent to our successful clothing boutique that could’ve been much more. Maybe Clothes the Loop would grow, still, without me. If Jacob stayed focused he could do it.

“Life celebration, not death reception,” I answered, still groggy from sleep. “And, just a reminder, you hated Patrick. Anyway, I just want enough time with each person — kind of like a one-on-one receiving line.”

I talked at the speakerphone, still lying down in bed. The new miracle drug hadn’t made my hair fall out, but my equilibrium was gone. I couldn’t stand, or shuffle to Ralph’s. I had to buzz the nurses for help to the bathroom.

Thank goodness for a voice beyond Shady Valley.

“Schedule appointments, silly. It’s like we do with the trunk shows, if you want a really banal comparison,” Jacob said.

“I don’t,” I snipped. He deserved it; he sounded distracted. “Are you paying attention?”

"Of course, I am walking to the back office, right now, OK? Does that make you happy? I hope so because we are slammed and I AM WALKING TO THE BACK. For you," Jacob yelled. I imagined him in his shiny black shoes, with risers in the heel to make him taller. I wondered if he was a platinum or a dirty blonde this week. "What I meant was, on the invite, tell them you'd like to spend quality time with each of them, and that you'll be up to receiving visitors during that same week. Let them decide when to visit."

"You're right," I sighed, sounding old, dead tired. Dying tired. "But where's the party in that? I wanted a party, Jacob."

"Have a final party at the end of the week. Make it special. You might not like everyone anymore. Or worse."

"Good point, but Suzanne'll be here any minute and now I have nothing for her to typeset," I moaned, immobilized. "I'm too dizzy to get to my computer."

"I'll do it and fax it over. Just tell Suzanne to wait. She owes you a little time after all the printing business you've given her," Jacob said. "Don't worry, 15 minutes. Oh no, it's Mrs. Drezner. You knew she'd walk in now. I've already dealt with Rachel White today."

"Aren't you in the back?" I asked, picturing him, the store, the activity. Missing it all, and him. Even the nosey neighbors who never bought and just snooped for gossip, like Rachel White. I'd love to hear what's going on from her about now. I didn't want to see Mrs. Drezner, though, he was right about that.

“Jennifer, I am in the back but you’ve been away too long. Remember, I can hear her when she’s at the antique store, a block down the street that loud, pinched, up-tight—”

“Jacob, stop.”

“I’ll hide from her. Not mature, but doable. If the girls try to find me to help Mrs. Drezner, I’ll sneak out the back door. Don’t worry, I’ll get the invite done.”

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And he did. He changed more than I thought he should, but I liked it.

Suzanne, the busybody owner of the local print shop who for some reason spoke with a hint of a southern accent, didn’t. She came bustling into my room and headed straight for the fax machine. When she found nothing there yet, she sat and tried to talk to me for a while, clearly uncomfortable all the while.

“You’d think from reading this Henry wasn’t in the picture or somethin’, honey,” she said, anxiously scanning the fax the moment it did spit out of the machine. I had to give her credit: she had tried to sit still until it came. I’d watched as she uncomfortably folded her rounded body into one of my brown square chairs. The sun streaked in over her shoulder, so I couldn’t see her face, but I guessed it registered impatience. I was too dizzy to care.

“Why? Because Mom’s the RSVP? She wants to do it,” I said.

“How about, ‘Please Join Henry Benson in celebrating the life of . . .’” Suzanne suggested. I could tell she was pacing, her voice kept coming from different places in the room, but I didn’t open my eyes.

“Fine,” I said.

“I’ll typeset both versions. Fax it to you. Show it to your mom, Henry, whoever. Then call and we’ll go with whatever you want, honey. OK? I’ve gotta go, you know, gotta get back to the city.”

“Sure, I know how it is,” I said. I did. Suzanne’s hatred of Shady Valley exuded from her every word and movement. It was an unimaginable place, yet here I was.

“OK, glad to see you, Jennifer. Really. You look great. Whatever they’re doing must be really working. You’ll be outta here in no time. I’ll fax you, OK? Great. See ya soon,” Suzanne said. The tap tap of her high heels on my fake wood floor picked up speed and then ended before the word “great.” The last words were from the hall. She was gone.

I pushed my nurse call button. “Yes, Jennifer?” I hated to call them unless it was an emergency. I knew they kept track of who pushed their button and when. Too many times and they got revenge: No response, or at the very least a really slow response. In the middle of the night, it better be death knocking on your door if you buzzed them.

“Sorry to bother you, but this latest treatment is, well, I’m still dizzy and I think I’m getting worse.” I sounded so helpless. I hated that, but I hated the way the room was pitching and swaying more.

“We’ll call your doctor, Jennifer, and see what he recommends.” Probably what he’d recommend would be to stop looking for a miracle, stop looking for a future. We’d exhausted his supply of hope. Henry pushing, then my mother, and then Henry again. “Please, doctor, money’s no object.”

“We’re doing all we can. All I know to do,” Dr. Chris, my exhausted oncologist, would tell them.

“Do more, doctor,” my mother said, like she could simply charge it up on her platinum American Express card. “Whatever you can find, you should try.” Though she’d never smoked, she had a breathy, B-movie actress voice—she had kissed Elvis on screen once—she used it while looking straight into his eyes. Most people, like Dr. Chris, were forced to look away.

And behind it all, I guess, I pushed the hardest. After all, I had the most to lose.

My son Hank believed lightning was God taking pictures, and when I went to heaven, he’d know I was taking lots of pictures of him when the storms came. Death was pretty clear cut for him, really. Poof, I’d be gone, up to heaven. Taking flash photos. At first, I hadn’t wanted to tell him that Mommy might not get better. I wanted to hold him and promise him everything would be all right and that I would be the strong, happy mommy I hoped he could still remember from his toddlerhood. But

after six months of hospital visits and guilty silence whenever he entered the room, he knew “Mommy’s sick” didn’t quite cover it. He was one smart cookie, my Hank. Henry and I decided to level with him when I moved to Shady Valley and he absorbed the possibility of my demise with the heartbreaking practicality of a three year old. I would still be his mommy, just in the clouds, taking photos.

Tears threatened to overtake me whenever I thought too much about the kids. Fifteen months without a mother at home. Baby Hannah had only known what it was like to have me rock her to sleep or tuck her in at night in her crib a few blessed times, in between hospital stays and when I wasn’t too ill at home. Paige was a wonderful nanny, a godsend really, but she wasn’t me.

Anger mixed with sadness choked me. I wanted to brush my teeth, but I couldn’t get up. I felt helplessness overwhelm me. This living in the moment thing was hell. Where was Henry? He was supposed to be coming for our “date night,” as we lamely called them. What time was it anyway?

#

There was a time when he couldn’t keep his hands off of me, my Henry. Our first year of marriage was something of a dream, now. Making love in the morning before work, some days, meeting at home at our condo at noon for more. Evenings were filled with workouts at the gym, dinners out and then more sweet, slow lovemaking. Beyond work, no outside distractions, no kiddos yet, no responsibilities except to discover each other.

“I’ve never been this happy,” he whispered to me as we cuddled in bed, the evening of our first anniversary. It was a beautiful, starry night and we had shared a candlelit dinner on our patio.

“Because I’ve finally learned how to cook?” I teased, looking up into his sparkling blue eyes. To say I hadn’t really mastered any meal would be an understatement. That evening, for our anniversary, I’d created gazpacho from scratch. I didn’t realize, though, that garlic cloves are pieces of garlic bulbs. I’d added eight bulbs. Fortunately, we both took our first bites—and spit them out at the same time.

“Yes, your cooking is the reason, clearly,” Henry answered, chuckling as he rolled over on top of me. “What you lack in the kitchen you more than make up for in the bedroom. Happy anniversary, love of my life,” he added before we made love again.

#

“Hi, honey. Weather channel again?” Henry said when he walked in my door. I had wanted to look good, a little attractive or at least not be smelly, when he arrived, but the dizziness had kept me from getting ready. I pulled the sheet up over my face and struggled to throw off my dark mood. I didn’t want to waste what little time we shared these days with pointless self-pity.

“Did you know storms turn to the right after dark? I just heard that,” I said through the sheet. I could see Henry through the thin fabric—the handsome man who used to want to touch me all over. Now we discussed the weather.

Henry's cleft chin nodded in my direction. "The nurses said you had a tough day. They're still waiting for Dr. Chris to figure out something to counteract the dizziness. They'll figure it out. Now pull the covers down. You know I think you look fine just how you are. I brought your favorite pasta, and a work problem for you to help me with, so get that sheet off your face and give me a kiss."

I pulled the sheet down slowly as Henry smiled, then bent over and kissed my forehead. More brotherly than affectionate, but at least he still cared enough to kiss me. It wasn't the passionate, intense kiss of our life before kids, nor was it the amazed, team-spirited kiss we used to share when we were both exhausted new parents and Hank was finally asleep. No, these kisses were those of a friend, a caring companion, a long-lost uncle. I don't know where the old kisses went, or how, if ever, to get them back.

Tonight I was dizzy, but sometimes on our date nights, I had felt OK. Shady Valley wasn't a place conducive to making love, of course, but still. Lately, he had seemed more and more distracted, and I struggled to find topics to hold his interest. New meds and side effects only took us so far. In the old days, he had shared every detail of his day with me and often asked my advice about work issues. He was passionate about life. About me and our relationship, and he'd swoop in from work and grab me in a tight hug and lingering kiss. He loved his job and was determined to be the best, and I loved that about him. He still made an effort to share bits and pieces of his life with me, but I couldn't shake the sensation that he was just going through the motions for my sake.

“You would not believe what an idiot Bill Jackson is,” Henry said, sweeping into our condo and grabbing me in a bear hug. I’d been rummaging through our refrigerator, trying to decide if I should attempt a meal. After a big kiss, he explained his boss at the law firm’s latest rainmaker scheme, which involved Henry joining the board of almost every nonprofit in town.

“But honey, it does seem like a good way to get your name out there—and your firm’s name out there,” I answered. I’d poured him a glass of Chianti and carried it to him, where he sat fuming in his favorite chair. Our condo was furnished in the traditional just-starting-out manner: one gray leather couch, one coffee table, one gray leather side chair. We had both told our parents we didn’t want help with furniture, so we were working and acquiring things slowly. His choice of his favorite chair was really his only choice.

“That’s not the point. You shouldn’t join boards of charities unless you believe in them. And I want to specialize in business startups,” he said.

“Well, a lot of nonprofits are run like small businesses,” I offered. “I’ll help you find a couple that would be a good fit. Maybe even a small-business incubator/funding group.”

“I love you, Jenn,” Henry said, and I walked over and climbed on his lap. “Once I’m here with you, nothing else matters.”

I looked away from the window and pulled my sheet back over my head. *What matters now?* I wondered. In high school, Henry’s prowess on the football field had

made him quite the heartthrob with the local girls. At thirty-five, his sandy blonde hair was definitely thinning on top, but he still had the broad shoulders and air of confidence that turned heads in a crowd. I didn't mind as long as I was standing beside him. *But now, he's out in the real world, turning heads, making deals, and I'm here.*

Together, we had made a picture-perfect pair. In the early years of our marriage, we were always in the social pages, smiling, successful, in love. Henry came from a much more demonstrative family than mine, and he was constantly holding my hand, hugging and kissing me in public. When we first started dating, I'd blushed constantly, unaccustomed to the overt attention and the pulsing sexual tension underlying each of our dates. Our relationship started out magnetic and intense—and it was obvious to those around us. During our first date, over lunch, it felt as if the air pulsed around us. When our fingers accidentally touched as he passed me the bread, I had felt the touch everywhere. And wanted more. A few months later, my friend, Maddie Wilson, the city's gossip columnist, described us as the couple “most in need of a cold shower or a quick exit from every fundraiser” in her annual awards. Of course, I had blushed and Henry had laughed.

I wondered if he ever felt as lonely as I did. He had to. Even though that initial head-over heels attraction had waned somewhat with the arrival of kids and a busy life, we still had had a vibrant sex life, before this. Before now. Did his healthy body crave the warmth and companionship of someone equally strong and vibrant? Every inch of me had been poked and prodded, radiated, and shot with chemicals. The

doctors warned us that sexual intercourse would be tough during some treatments, with vaginal dryness, early menopause, and other physical...blessings. But they said we should try to maintain intimacy. Touching. Holding hands. As much as I could tolerate, as much as Henry and I could naturally feel in this unnatural state, this artificial place. Until today, and until these new meds, I'd felt as if we could try to have sex. But with the room swooping, I felt lucky being able to communicate.

I looked up at Henry. *How does he see me now? As a wife? As a lover?* At six feet, three inches, Henry exuded vitality, while I seemed to be shrinking by the day. Would he notice if I disappeared entirely? Or would he be relieved it was over at last?

"Pull the sheet down honey," Henry said. "Your mother said Alex Thomas is back in town. Did you know that?"

Alex Thomas...

I kept the sheet over my face so Henry couldn't see me blush. My ex-boyfriend, here. In town. My past, back in my present.

And something in me wanted to see him.