

a novel about life... and cancer

How to Climb
the Eiffel
Tower



ELIZABETH HEIN

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a novel

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*To all the doctors and nurses who shepherd cancer patients
through the Valley of Death and out the other side.*

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Part One

1

The Colors of Cancer

Ellery Cancer Center protruded from the hospital's facade like a glass tumor. The night before, a Kafkaesque voicemail told me to report to the reception lobby by 7:00 for my 9:00 appointment. I left the house at 6:00 sharp even though the hospital was twenty minutes away. An appointment with some strange specialist wasn't going to make me deviate from my routine.

My footsteps echoing through the brightly tiled lobby accented the nervous murmuring of the people waiting in line as I strode past them to the reception desk. The receptionist didn't even look up when I said, "Blaine. Lara Blaine. I have a 9:00 with Dr. Lander." She robotically found my file in the tall stack to her left, handed me the itinerary clipped to the front, and moved my file to the short stack to her right. My itinerary said to report to the red waiting room by 8:00.

I stood to the side of the room and watched people until I

understood that the lines of multicolored tiles in the lobby's floor were not decorative. They were paths to the color-coded areas of the Cancer Center. I followed the line of red tiles from the reception desk to the red waiting room. A clot of people sat on crimson and burgundy couches clutching their itineraries. I sat just inside the doorway and watched as people disappeared one by one through the slick red doors at the far end of the room. No one came back. An hour later, it was my turn. On the other side of the red doors, an old man with hairy knuckles checked my name against his orders then jabbed a needle in my arm. We didn't say a word to each other. I liked that.

The next stop on my itinerary was the green waiting room. A line of green tiles in the floor led me back to the lobby and up two flights of stairs to another room with worry worn carpeting and faded couches sagging under the weight of their occupants' despair, but all in green. I'd roamed the Ellery Cancer Center for nearly an hour and had yet to speak to a soul. I slipped into the crowded room, commandeered the pea green love seat in the corner, and opened my dog-eared copy of *Great Expectations*. I held the tattered pages in front of my face, yet couldn't read. I watched the elderly couple across from me over the top of the book.

I don't belong here. I'm not like these people. I'm young. I crossed one leg over the other and clenched my thighs together. There's nothing wrong with me. It's just a false positive. I'm fine.

The elderly man's hand shook as he lifted a cup of tea to his wife's lips. The limp paper label dangling over the edge of the foam cup taunted me. I should have been researching the effect of the recent earthquake in Northern China on the green tea crop for my boss's presentation the following week,

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not sitting in that waiting room. *This is such a waste of time. So what if I have weird periods? Doesn't everyone?*

I turned away from the old people and focused on the normal looking woman in a black suit slowly making her way down the corridor. I assumed she was a doctor or pharmaceutical salesperson until she stopped in the doorway to hack into a tissue. She saw me looking at her and lurched over. "May I sit with you?" I expected the woman's voice to be as smooth as her grey silk blouse, but it sounded as scratchy as wool against bare skin. I moved my battered leather backpack to let her sit down.

"Jane Babcock-Roberts."

"Lara Blaine," I replied with a curt nod.

"I think you sprinted past me on the stairwell earlier," Jane sighed. "I used to be able to run up stairs like that."

"I'm good at stairs. I climb the Eiffel Tower every Tuesday."

Jane dabbed perspiration from her upper lip with a clean tissue and tucked it in her sleeve. "I climbed the Eiffel Tower once. What a view, huh?"

"I haven't actually been to Paris," I replied. "It's a setting on the stair stepper at my gym."

"That doesn't sound nearly as fun." Jane flipped her long silver-blond hair over her shoulder. "And there wouldn't be any croissants when you finished."

A couple entered the room and perched on the edge of the moss colored couch next to us. The stench of fear wafted off them. The wife stared at a stain in the carpet while the husband repeatedly flipped through the pamphlets in his hand as if they would miraculously reveal some new information that wasn't there a moment before. Jane shifted her weight to turn away from the couple and face me. "How well do you know these doctors?" she whispered.

“I’ve never been here before. I’m just here to get some test results.” I recrossed my legs and tapped the toe of my scuffed black flat against the side table. “I’m sure it’s nothing though. The first doctor I saw is making me see this specialist just to cover her ass.”

“I’m here for test results, too. Although, I’m pretty sure there’s something wrong. Busy medical practices don’t give you a next-day appointment when there’s nothing wrong.”

I bounced my novel on my knee. The first doctor had scheduled that day’s appointment for three days after I saw her. I didn’t think it meant anything; I thought they were efficient. “Maybe they had a cancellation.”

“Maybe.” Jane absently twisted a scratched men’s watch around her thin wrist three times.

A brawny orderly appeared with a wheelchair to collect the elderly couple. Jane and I watched the old man carry his wife’s pocketbook over his arm as he followed her through the sliding green doors. Jane cleared her throat. “What are you reading there?”

“*Great Expectations*.” I stopped bouncing and tapping. “I read a Dickens every summer. *Nicholas Nickleby* is my favorite. This one is good, but the girl really annoys me. I like Magwitch, but—” I was cut off when an aide called Jane’s name. She smiled a quick goodbye as she got up then disappeared through the green doors.

Maybe I should just leave. Which color tiles leads the way out of here? If I walk out now, will they come looking for me? I turned toward the wall and reopened my book. My book friends would protect me from the room full of bewildered people clutching their itineraries like shields against bad news.

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Nearly an hour later, a nurse in tired pink scrubs called my name and ushered me into a small room for a health interrogation. The first six pages of questions about my sleeping and eating habits didn't faze me. When the nurse flipped to the seventh page and asked, "When were you first sexually active?" I panicked. *Shit, what did I tell that other nurse the other day? Certainly not the truth. I bet she's got my answers on that clipboard and is trying to catch me in a lie.*

"I was twenty-one, so eight years ago?" The nurse did not look up from her clipboard. *That must have been the right answer.*

"Number of sexual partners in the last five years?"

"Zero." *That one was easy.*

"And before that?"

My mouth went dry. My abdomen clenched as the old sense of terror slithered up my spine. *None of your God damn business!* I slid forward on the cold metal chair.

"Just two. And, we always used protection so I've never had any STD's." All lies. I leaned forward, ready to bolt if necessary. The nurse flipped the page and moved on to questions regarding drug use. I could relax. The metal chair felt cool against my sweaty back when I slid back again.

Once she was finished with me, the nurse shoved a paper gown in my hands, and demanded I strip from the waist down. I didn't want to, but it was easier to let them poke and prod my body than talk about my past. I quickly pulled off my chinos and folded my panties inside them. I didn't realize how much I was sweating until the cold air in the Pepto-Bismol pink room hit the backs of my bare legs.

A light knock on the door startled me. I swung around to face the door as an efficient blond strode in and thrust her

hand toward me. “Lauren Blaine?”

I ignored the gesture. “It’s Lara.”

The doctor walked around me and dropped my file on the desk. “I’m Karen Lander.” The nurse came in and closed the door. “This is Stephanie. I believe you were referred to us by Dr. Bonnerheim?” Dr. Lander meticulously washed her hands and pulled on a pair of blue latex gloves. She stepped around me again as if I was an ill placed piece of furniture. “I see you’ve had a number abnormal Pap smears. And Bonnerheim did a colposcopy?”

“I don’t mean to be any trouble.” I held the thin paper gown together behind my back while Dr. Lander opened a drawer lined with glistening instruments. “Dr. Bonnerheim is just being overly cautious.”

“That’s a good thing.” Dr. Lander said over her shoulder. “She caught it in the early stages.”

“What?” The walls felt like they were caving in. “What do you mean, caught it?” I swallowed hard.

“The colposcopy found cancerous cells.” The doctor pulled a gooseneck lamp to the foot of the examination table. “Didn’t Bonnerheim tell you that she saw abnormal cells?”

I searched my memory. I remembered the gynecologist saying that I had failed a test and that I had to go see a specialist, but I didn’t remember her actually saying the word cancer. I would have remembered the word cancer. Cancer had stolen my grandparents.

Dr. Lander pulled the stirrups out with enough force to move the examination table several inches. “Why don’t we take a look?” I considered running, but the nurse was leaning on the door. I was naked. My clothes were out of reach. I was trapped. I had to submit.

I pulled myself up on the exam table and lay back. By the

time my head hit the surface, my mind had disengaged from my body. I didn't feel the thin paper gown slipping down my thighs or the nurse positioning my feet in the stirrups. I had escaped with my book friends. While Dr. Lander dictated copious notes into a handheld recorder, I wandered through Narnia eating Turkish delight with Edmund Pevensie and the White Witch.

An astringent smell filled my nostrils as cool fingers grasped my shoulder. I blinked a few times. The nurse helped me to sit up. The light seemed harsher, the walls pinker. Dr. Lander sat at a small desk with her back to me. "We should schedule you for a LEEP procedure right away. My exam verifies Dr. Bonnerheim's diagnosis. It is cancer. We had hoped it was pre-cancerous, but I'm afraid not. I'll send off some tissue samples to pathology to tell us if the cancer has spread beyond the cervix itself, but..." I didn't hear anything beyond "cancer" and "cervix" before my mind shut down again.

By the time the nurse shook me out of my stupor again Dr. Lander was long gone. "Miss Blaine? I'm afraid we need to clear the room now."

"Okay, I'll go now." I massaged my aching jaw. I didn't remember clenching my teeth.

The nurse dropped a thick folder on the empty pink plastic chair. "Here is a hard copy of the information the doctor went over. You might want to read that at home." She placed an orange form beside my backpack. "Take this to the orange check-out desk on your way out. They'll give you a blue sheet with the appointment information for your procedure." *Information? Procedure? What the hell is she talking about?* The nurse glanced up at the wall clock. "Can I

call someone for you? Your husband? A friend?"

"No. I'm better off alone."

Once the nurse was gone, I snatched a handful of tissues from the box on the desk and wiped the remaining lubricating jelly off my thighs. My skin still felt sticky. I ran the water in the tiny sink until it scalded my fingers, then scrubbed my body with a wad of brown paper towels.

Cervical cancer? But it was just a false positive.

A line of orange tiles led me out of the maze of examination rooms to an exit lobby. Gripping the instructions for my next appointment, I stumbled toward the banks of elevators, nearly walking into Jane. "Oh, wow... excuse me."

"That's okay. I'm okay," Jane replied. She brushed a long silver hair off her face with a trembling finger. "Where are you off to in such a rush?"

"Work. I left a note on my monitor saying I'd be in by noon."

Jane glanced down at her scratched watch. "It's half past one. It's already too late." Jane sniffled loudly and turned away. She wiped a tear away with a French manicured fingernail before she stabbed the elevator button. The doors slid open and, stunned, we both entered. "How was your appointment?"

"Awful. I have cancer."

"Me too," Jane snorted. "The nice young doctor actually apologized when he told me."

"My doctor's a spiky haired bitch." As we slowly descended, laughter rose in my chest like bubbles in a simmering pot. The heat inside me rose with every floor the elevator fell.

I have cancer.

By the time the doors opened on to the first floor, my tittering progressed into uncontrolled howls until my chest

and belly burned. The doors began to close again, but I couldn't move. I just stood there in the elevator hugging my backpack to my chest. Jane clumsily shoved her shoulder against the door. "Are you all right? You're frightening me." She stepped back inside and lightly tugged on my shoulder. "I can't just leave you here in hysterics. Would you like to get a cup of coffee or something?"

"I need to get back to work." I tried to catch my breath.

"You can't go to the office looking like that. What would your colleagues think?"

"I can't?" I looked down at my rumpled white blouse and wrinkled chinos. I ran my fingers through my disheveled hair and twisted it behind my head. "I can't go back looking like this. They'll know."

"Come on. I'll buy you a coffee."

I stepped out of the elevator. "Okay, but not the cafeteria. I saw a Starbucks off of the lobby earlier."

"I'm surprised you can remember anything in your state," Jane said.

"I have exemplary retention skills," I muttered as I followed her across the crowded reception lobby.

In Starbucks, I ordered a sweet frozen concoction topped with whipped cream and chocolate syrup. Jane ordered a small black coffee. Jane handed the young man a ten-dollar bill and carelessly threw the change in the tip jar. We found a table near the window and passed several awkward moments silently sipping our drinks. Jane watched a woman step outside and stagger back from the wall of heat and humidity. "August in North Carolina. It'll get you every time," she said. Other than the gravel voice, Jane appeared fine. She looked like a successful businesswoman in her sixties at the top of her game. She didn't look like a person with cancer.

“What kind of cancer do you have?” I asked.

Jane dabbed her lips with a paper napkin. “Lung. You?”

“Cervical.”

“Oh.” Jane ran her finger around the rim of her cup. “I’m sorry, I don’t know anything about that kind.”

“Me either,” I replied. A blast of frigid air blew up my pant leg as the air conditioning kicked on. “I guess I’ll learn though. They gave me a packet to read.”

“Me too,” Jane sighed. She pulled a bulging folder from her bag and ran her long fingers over the large watercolor picture of a sun on the cover of the packet. “This thing looks like the prospectus for a preschool, not a ‘so you have a potentially fatal disease’ packet. I should really sit down and study this information. Probably won’t. Anyway, I still need to have more tests before they can even come up with a plan.”

“Me too.” I moved to the chair further away from the air conditioning vent and closer to Jane.

Jane tapped two fingernails against her lips. “I want a cigarette so bad. I finally quit just last year and then, look what happened. I got cancer.” Jane’s breath hitched and she began to cough. Droplets of bloody sputum speckled the tissue she held in front of her mouth. “Oh my God, I have lung cancer! This cough is cancer! What am I going to tell my mother? You know she’s going to say this is my fault.”

Mama would certainly find a way to make this my fault, if she knew.

“She always said my smoking was a filthy habit. If she hadn’t been such a shrew about it, I probably would have quit when I was teenager.” Jane twisted her watch again. “I wish my dad were still alive.”

We both turned to stare at the bright sunshine playing off the fountain in the courtyard. A little boy ran around trying

to catch the rainbows formed by the mist. “I should call my son, Tom.” Jane popped the top off her cup and drained it. “Or, maybe I should wait until after I get more specific results.”

“That might be best. Don’t tell anyone until you’re sure.”

We both stared out the window for a few more moments until Jane asked, “When?”

“What?”

“When are your tests?”

I checked the blue appointment sheet sticking out of my backpack. “Thursday.”

“I’m Friday,” Jane replied. “Too bad. It would have been nice to see a friendly face.”

The cell phone on Jane’s hip rang. “Jane Babcock-Roberts,” she whispered into the mouthpiece. “No Candace, we will not pay that invoice until they deliver the product—all the product.” She spoke with authority. “We sent a purchase order for six pallets of stone and only received four. When we receive the remaining two, then I will pay... make sure they come from the same lot of stone... No, I can’t call them... Tell them I’m in a meeting. Off-site.” Jane tucked her phone back in its holder. “I’m sorry. That was rude of me. How are you feeling now? Better?”

“Is it a problem for you to be away from the office?”

“Yes and no, I’ve lost some time on several projects but it’ll be fine.” Jane flipped the plastic coffee cup lid absently in her hand. “I’m more concerned about how today will affect the company long-term.”

“What kind of company is it?”

“We build custom homes.” Jane’s hand went to her wrist again. “I took over after my father’s death.”

“At least you won’t get fired. My boss will fire me if she

finds out I'm sick." I stirred my drink trying to come up with a good excuse for where I'd been all morning.

"It's not as easy as you might think to fire someone for something like this. There are employment regulations," Jane said. "What kind of cancer did you say you had again?"

"Cervical."

"Did you know something was wrong?"

"I collapsed at the gym one night, so they made me go to the hospital in an ambulance. The ER doctors wouldn't let me leave until I saw a gynecologist." I didn't tell Jane that the nurses kept asking me questions I didn't want to answer. "How 'bout you, did you know you were sick?"

"Oh yeah." Jane rolled the wrapper from my straw into a snail. "I've had this nasty cough for a while. I just kept putting off having it looked at. I thought I was prepared to hear bad news, but I guess you're never fully prepared for news like this." Jane dabbed at her lips again before smearing on a coat of merlot lipstick. "I'm sorry. I can't remember the last time I was so emotional. Probably when my son went off to school. Do you have kids?"

"No children. No husband; just me."

Jane pulled her bag onto her shoulder. "Do you have family in the area?"

"No. My mother lives up north. We're not close," I said.

"Believe me, I understand about difficult mothers." Jane made a show of looking at her cell phone and stood up. "Well, if you're feeling better, I really should be getting back. I need to salvage at least part of this day."

2

Cubicle Chaos

Hurricane Mavis saved that afternoon. I needed something exigent to drown out the sounds of Garlic Breath playing Spider Solitaire in the next cubicle and Dr. Lander's voice bouncing around inside my head. Five minutes into my drive to Bettel Occidental Commodities, NPR reported that Mavis was building strength to the east of the Dominican Republic. By the time I sat down at my desk, I was planning charts and graphs on the storm's impact on regional shipping routes. As a commodities analyst I needed to consider the effect of a direct hit to the southeast dependent on the tides, ports and evacuation routes. I was giddy with the possibilities.

My happy bubble of concentration popped when the elevator doors slid open and my boss, Letitia, clattered out. The entire eighth floor peeked out of their cubicles like doughboys watching for incoming grenades. Everyone looked to see what kind of cup Letitia held. We knew that fattening coffee drinks meant her presentation went well,

where iced tea meant it was time to hide under your desk. She held a Venti iced tea against the hip of her sleek black dress. I was relieved to hear the sound of Letitia's stiletto heels tapping out someone else's fate on the other side of the eighth floor. Analysts had a short life span in Letitia's department. She had a way of sucking the life out of them and scattering their empty shells around the building. Earlier that week, I found a file box filled with picture frames and coffee mugs protruding from Bald Guy with Twin Girls' cubicle. He had put the decimal point in the wrong place on his monthly report. A fat woman with cropped grey hair had pinned pictures of kittens to the walls of Bald Guy's cube. I gave her six weeks.

Letitia's footsteps stopped on the other side of the room. "You call this a market analysis?" She paused to make sure we were all listening. "Where are the long-term trends? The seasonal overview? When did you send this to Blaine?"

"I ran out of time, so I added it to the end of Blaine's PowerPoint this morning," a woman's voice wailed. I recognized it as belonging to Short Red Hair who sat next to Pathetic Dog Owner. I made a mental note to password protect the presentations.

"Swenson asked me a question about the global impacts that I couldn't answer because you didn't include any background notes. You made me look like an idiot in front of the executive committee!" The entire room sucked in their breath as if watching a cheetah taking down an impala on the outer edge of the herd. "Why can't you be more like Blaine? They loved the bauxite presentation."

I smiled. I had done a particularly good job on that PowerPoint; the bullet points were animated, the graphs were detailed, and the data points overlaid my projections.

“Oh come on,” Short Red Hair said. “That’s not fair. That guy is a machine.”

“Listen to that, Blaine,” Garlic-Breath clucked through the cubicle wall. “They think you’re a dude.”

“Blaine is a machine,” Letitia replied with a flip of her sleek black ponytail. “She works harder and is smarter than all y’all combined.” The recognition felt hollow when used against someone else. “You know, if you spent less time shopping for shoes—”

“What?”

“It’s a corporate firewall, you idiot. IT tracks your browser history and alerts me to any irregularities. Unless you’re preparing a report on leather futures, there is no reason to spend so much time on Zappos.” The room exhaled in relief. If Letitia could make light of the situation, then she wasn’t that angry. No one would be fired that day.

As soon as Letitia was safely encased inside her glass fortress of an office, Pathetic Dog Owner lumbered into Garlic Breath’s cubicle. “Did you hear that? Letitia called Blainiac over here a machine.”

I stared at the hurricane rotating in the Atlantic but I couldn’t concentrate anymore. I wished Garlic Breath would choke on one of the pork rinds he was always munching.

“Do you think Letitia will give her another big bonus?” Pathetic Dog Owner grumbled.

“Keep your voice down,” Garlic Breath hissed. “I told you that on the down low. No one’s supposed to know that Letitia gives her a little extra here and there in exchange for compiling everyone’s reports for her presentations. Letitia doesn’t know I overheard Blaine whining about not getting credit for her work.”

“Like that’s ever going to happen,” Pathetic Dog Owner said. “Letitia’s no idiot. If it means throwing Blaine a bone every once in a while, she’ll do it.”

Little did Garlic Breath and Pathetic Dog Owner know, Letitia had thrown me far more than a bone. Every quarter our department successfully predicted market trends, Letitia received a bonus that more than doubled her salary. In exchange for me doing most of her job for her, she shared those bonuses with me.

“And, could you see Letitia ever letting that train wreck stand up in front of the steering committee?”

Why can’t you just leave me alone and let me do my work? I looked up and saw Pathetic Dog Owner peeking over Garlic Breath’s cubicle wall. I winked at him. His head popped back down behind the wall as the two of them guffawed like the football players who would make faces at me through the library stacks in high school. I put my headphones on and listened to the emergency weather messages about the hurricane to block them out.

At 5:01, everyone else shut down their workstations and head for the exits as if the building was on fire. I waited for Garlic Breath to gather his lunch box and sundry electronics, then picked my way down the line of cubicles to Letitia’s glass walled office. The late afternoon sunshine reflected off Letitia’s diamond earrings, projecting rainbows across the slick glass and steel desk. I pushed open the frameless glass door. “Excuse me, Letitia?”

Letitia startled and automatically whipped her reading glasses off her nose. She spun around in her chair to block her screen. “Blaine! What’s up?”

“I’m sorry I didn’t make it back this morning but—”

“You weren’t here?”

“I left a note. Didn’t anyone—”

“You okay?”

“I’m fine.” I checked that everyone had indeed left before I whispered, “Well, actually, I need to take Thursday off. I am having some ‘woman troubles’ and need to have a procedure. I can dial in from home and post my reports before the close of business.”

Letitia crossed her spindly legs and rolled one slender ankle as she mused, “I had a cyst on my ovary a few years ago. It was nothing serious, but boy, was I crampy for a few days. If you want to just lie on the couch Friday, you can work from home.”

“That won’t be necessary. I’ll be fine.”

Letitia uncrossed and recrossed her legs. “Hey, good job on that bauxite report. They really liked it.”

I rolled my eyes and turned to leave. *Of course they liked it. It was an awesome presentation.*

“So what’re you working on now?”

“There’s a hurricane coming. I’m analyzing the ramifications. That’s what I do, the research and analysis that you present as your work.”

“Come on Blaine, I know you’re mad that I didn’t have you present the bauxite research yourself but... well ... that’s just not going to happen.” Letitia shrugged and flipped her long ponytail over her shoulder and flashed me a brilliant, capped smile. “Frank Mariano did imply that there would be a bonus in the works for me. I’ll share it with you.”

I bit the inside of my cheek to keep from pointing out that the entire bonus should have been mine. I had done all the work while Letitia got all the glory. “I want my half in cash this time. I don’t like having to go to the bank to deposit your checks.”

Even though my day had been disrupted, I left work as usual at 6:18 and drove to Silver Star Fitness for my daily workout. If I didn't get a full hour of aerobic exercise, the nightmares would get me. Tuesday was a stair stepper day. I changed into a pair of bike shorts and oversized t-shirt in the locker room and mounted my preferred machine, the one in the corner away from the television and nattering housewives that hogged the recumbent bikes. As I set the machine's program for the Eiffel Tower, I thought about Jane Babcock-Roberts.

I didn't know anyone actually climbed the Eiffel Tower anymore. View or no view, that can't be safe. You could get trapped way up there with an axe murderer. No way. I'll stick to my nice predictable, safe machines.

The next thing I knew, the machine beeped indicating that I had climbed to the top. My long hair was plastered to my head and my muscles ached, yet I didn't feel the sense of release I usually got from my workout. I moved to a treadmill to warm down by running a couple of miles.

I wonder how that Jane woman is now. Did she tell her son about the cancer?

I hoped not. The longer her son didn't know Cancer, the better. I knew Cancer. He stole my grandparents. He made my mother come back from wherever she'd been for the first seven years of my life and pack my little life into the trunk of her big yellow Plymouth. Cancer killed the only people that ever loved me. And now he'd come for me.

After my workout, I stepped into Lucky Lee's Chinese Restaurant, conveniently located two doors down from the gym. As soon as I opened the door, the tiny woman behind the high counter put a hand on the red plastic bag in front

of her. “Hold on just a sec, Miss Lara. I think Helen forgot your Pineapple Surprise. Can you wait a few minutes? Do you have time?”

I don't know. Do I?

“That’s fine, Mrs. Lee. I can wait.” I put my gym bag down and picked up the takeout menu. There was no real reason to read it. I ate the same thing every night - Moo Goo Gai Pan, white rice and Pineapple Surprise. Over the years, the Lees had learned to have it waiting for me. I appreciated their efficiency.

“Good workout tonight?”

“Some old lady set the treadmill to the slowest setting and I had to reprogram the whole thing. But, it was fine.”

Susan Lee straightened the already straight stack of menus next to a waving cat statue. “It’s supposed to rain tonight. My garden sure needs it.”

“We are 3.6 inches below average right now but that is 30% better than—” The arrival of a ten-year-old girl in a bright yellow soccer uniform spared Susan Lee any further discussion of North Carolina’s annual rain fall.

“Here you go, Miss Lara.”

I smiled at Helen Lee. “Game today?”

“Just practice.” Helen tightened the yellow bow around her long ponytail. “Hey, guess what. I got an A on that spelling test today. Thanks for helping me study.”

“Thank you for sitting with her when you came in last night.”

“It’s okay.” I tucked a strand of my dishwater blonde hair behind my ear. “I like helping Helen with her vocabulary. I was always wicked good at English.” Little did the Lees know, drilling Helen on her spelling words had been the highlight of my week.

Seven and a half minutes after leaving Lucky Lee's, my reinforced steel garage door squealed and thumped closed behind me and Ruby, my precious red VW Bug. I lingered in the garage to wipe some dirt off Ruby's hood. On this terrible day, I wished the little car could give me back some of the love I poured into her. Ruby's paint gleamed, her leather was supple and her engine well tuned. In her trunk, I kept a neatly packed bag with a change of clothes and photocopies of my important documents. It took me less than a minute to unlock the three deadbolts between the garage and my apartment, enter, and lock myself inside. I hung my keys and backpack on their respective hooks next to the door. Everything I needed was at hand in case my stepfather tracked me down and I needed to make quick getaway.

I dropped the bags of food on top of the three moving boxes full of books I used as a makeshift coffee table. The food could wait, I needed a hot shower. My skin prickled with dried sweat and I felt dirty. People had been touching my body. Twenty minutes later, I flopped down on the couch and reached for the remote. It was gone.

Can this day get any worse? In a fit of frustration, I clawed at the old wool blanket thrown over the back of the couch and yanked out the soft leather cushions. I finally found the remote wedged between two of the moving boxes. I slammed it down on top of the closest box before putting the couch back together and folding the threadbare blanket so its broad stripes lined up again. The red and blue stripes reminded me of the tiles in the Ellery Cancer Center that morning. Dr. Lander's voice echoed in my head. *Cancer. Cervical cancer.*

I grabbed the remote and turned on the TV as loud as possible. I went around the channels three times before

settling on a *Law & Order* rerun. Every other channel seemed to be showing stories of miracle diagnoses and bizarre surgeries. Before opening the bags of Chinese food, I laid an old towel over my lap in case I dropped any food. The brown leather couch and big screen TV were the only pieces of real furniture in the three-bedroom condominium. And, I bought those begrudgingly.

I considered furniture an impediment. Material things weren't worth their high cost. For much of my life, my mother had shuttled me from one roach infested trailer park to another. Any toys or treasures I accumulated along the way were either sold or left behind when Mama lost yet another waitressing job. We eventually stopped living out of suitcases the year I turned fourteen and we moved to Hawthorne, New Hampshire. That was the year Mama married Dale Clemmons. Mama was happy she finally found a man willing to take her. She didn't care that Dale considered us a package deal. She wanted the security of Dale's 300-acre dairy farm and the promise of a full wallet. Dale wanted Mama to cook and clean and pump up his ego. No one cared what I wanted. Mama decorated the drafty back bedroom in the crumbling addition to Dale's rambling farmhouse with flowered wallpaper and a fussy white canopy bed, as if ruffles and bows could hide what Dale did to me there.

Sometime during the second episode of *Law & Order*, my eyelids grew heavy. My apartment fell away. I was back in the Ellery Cancer Center following the tiles in the floor. I never lifted my eyes from the floor yet I kept losing my way. Then, I bounced off a Pepto-Bismol membrane and landed with a splat in a puddle of sticky jelly. On the other side of the translucent membrane, green cancer cells were hacking off pieces of the membrane and devouring them with glee. I

pushed at the surface of the membrane, desperate to find an opening, when one of the cancer cells stopped and looked up. It was Dale.

I gasped awake. My eyes were open in the blue glow of the television, yet I could still see Dale's smirking face, pink flesh hanging from his lips.

This is Dale. He gave me cancer.

That can't be right. You don't catch cancer. Do you? I vaguely remembered reading something about vaccinating kids against a virus that caused gynecological cancers. GVB? HPH? HPV?

Okay, calm down. Use your brain. Learn what you need to know. Knowledge is power. I found the packet of information the nurse gave me and started reading.

For the first time in my life, the pursuit of information failed me. I learned that cervical cancer is caused by the sexually transmitted Human Papillomavirus. Since Dale was the only person I'd ever had sexual contact with, he had definitely given me the virus that led to the cancer. He really was devouring me from the inside out.

Author's Note

Cancer is a very personal disease—every individual requires his or her own treatment plan. Throughout this book, I have merely skimmed the surface of what it is like to experience cervical cancer treatment. I made a conscious decision to not discuss the staging and specific details of Lara's cancer. Although I did extensive research and spoke with many cancer patients, this book is at heart a work of fiction. My primary goal is to guide the reader on a journey through the characters' lives; therefore, I have intentionally left out some of the more graphic parts of cancer treatment to allow the reader to focus on the personal transformations of the individual characters.

If you would like additional information on cancer and its treatment, I recommend the following resources: The American Cancer Society, National Cancer Institute, the Foundation for Women's Cancer, and the CDC.

About the Author

Elizabeth Hein is a mother, author, and cancer survivor. She grew up in Massachusetts and now lives in Durham, North Carolina. She writes about the people who go unnoticed in life—the woman standing in line at the bank, the mousy gal in the last cubicle, the PTA mom. She wants you to care about these women and think twice before ignoring the people you meet each day. When not writing, she is trying to raise two young women and a husband.

A reading guide will be available
at the end of the final edition of this book,
which will be released for sale in October 2014.

An author interview will be available online:
ehein.lightmessages.com



How to Climb the Eiffel Tower

Lara Blaine believes that she can hide from her past by clinging to a rigid routine of work and exercise. She endures her self-imposed isolation until a cancer diagnosis cracks her hard exterior. Lara's journey through cancer treatment should be the worst year of her life. Instead, it is the year she learns how to live. She befriends Jane, another cancer patient who teaches her how to be powerful even in the face of death. Accepting help from the people around her allows Lara to confront the past and discover that she is not alone in the world. With the support of her new friends, Lara gains the courage to love and embrace life. Like climbing the Eiffel Tower, the year Lara meets Jane is tough, painful, and totally worth it.

*"An empowering, redemptive novel
filled with wisdom and kindness."*

—Summer Kinard

Best-selling author of *Can't Buy Me Love*

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 Light Messages