

STARING
DOWN
THE
DRAGON

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CHAPTER ONE

He walked for fifteen minutes before
he thought he came to it.

“Cross it,” she said, and he thought
there would be a bridge of some sort.

There was none.

—Toni Morrison, *Song of Solomon*

I didn't know what to wear my first day back at school. I wanted to look fantastic—better than fantastic—I wanted to look like I never had cancer. That was it. I *had* cancer, like I *had* a broken leg in seventh grade. Then my leg healed, like my cancer treatment was over, and I thought I could go back to school and be just me, Rell DeMello.

Enter memories: me in fifth grade, dancing hula in the Lei Day Pageant; me in seventh grade, captain of the soccer team; and me last September, at the beginning of my sophomore year, when I was diagnosed with cancer.

Before I was diagnosed, I never used the word cancer. Cancer was a disease old people got, and most of them died. But by April, I could do a science project on it, complete with myself as a visual aid.

When I was in treatment at Stanhope Hospital in San Francisco, I would dream about coming back home to Hawaii. I would dream about playing with my dog, about going to the beach, and driving around with my friend Emi. I made up scenes in my head about my first day back at Kailua High. I imagined kids would pile lei around my neck so high that you couldn't see my face. I imagined a "Welcome Home Rell" banner in big red letters. I even practiced a thank-you speech I'd give at my "Welcome Home Rell Assembly."

When the day came for me to go back to school, all I wanted to do was to sneak back to my old desk and pretend nothing had ever happened. Going back to school after being treated for cancer wasn't exactly like the first day after summer vacation. I didn't think any teacher would ask me to write an essay about what I did on my trip to Chemotherapy Village.

My mom told me I was going back to my regular class, but I was still afraid they'd put me in a special class, or assign me a special seat, like Ella Cunha, who wears two hearing aids and sits in the front row for every class. Most of all, I was afraid of kids' questions.

I knew I looked different. When I left Hawaii, I had long brown hair, with matching eyebrows and eyelashes, and a 34B chest. I was going back twenty pounds lighter, bald, wearing a wig, and sporting a six-inch pink scar across my neck that in no way could pass for bruises from heavy-duty kissing. All I needed were two bolts sticking out of my neck and I would have been shoo-in for the role of Frankenstein in any school play.

I was afraid. I was afraid that kids would stare at me. I was afraid they'd laugh. I was afraid they wouldn't talk to me. But most of all I was afraid of their questions.

On the Sunday night before I went back to school, I spent an hour in front of the mirror, practicing answering their questions. I smiled, I tilted my head, and I told jokes about myself. I made up stories about the cute doctors in the hospital, about riding the

cable cars in San Francisco, and eating chocolate at Ghirardelli Square. I made it sound like a bad case of the flu.

When the day came to go back to school, my mother drove me—in her two-door, beige Saturn. She drove with two hands gripping the steering wheel, white-knuckled and in perfect silence until we pulled into the school parking lot. Then she said, “It’s going to be okay.” She said as if she were trying to convince both of us.

“I know, Mom,” I answered.

“Really,” she said, “it will be okay.”

“Really, Mom, I know.”

Then she drove in the parking lot, right through it and up to the front steps of school, right in front of packs of kids blasting their music, or getting their last grinding kisses in before the bell rang. I wanted to die. (Hmm, I almost did die, that’s what got me in this mess to begin with.)

My mother rubbed my back. “I love you, Rell,” she said it as if she had magical powers.

“I love you, too, Mom,” I said.

I opened the door and inched out of the car. I slung my backpack over my shoulder and took my first step.

“Good luck, Sweetheart,” Mom said.

I looked back. She waved at me and threw me a kiss like she was the Grand Marshal of the Mothers’ Love Parade.

I told myself to smile, wave back, and watch her to make sure she drove away.

There it was: Kailua High School. I stared at all the kids jammed on the stairs. There were so many kids around. I felt like I was trapped in a fast-forward video, but I was in slow motion.

I stared at the front door, hugged my backpack to my chest, and took the first step. I made it to the top of the steps—step-by-step and I stood there.

It’s no big deal, I told myself. Just go in.

A guy shoved me and a herd of his buddies pushed past me. I was afraid that he would bump me and my scar would split open and my guts would spill out. It had been months since my surgery but I was still afraid someone would bump me. I imagined my guts leaking out on my shirt.

It's going to be okay, I told myself.

All I had to do was walk in the door. But I couldn't. I froze, then I turned around, I walked down the steps, took a right, and walked four blocks to McDonald's, where I spent the rest of the day.



That afternoon when my mom came to pick me up I was waiting at the sidewalk for her. When I got in the car, she leaned over and kissed me. "How did it go today, Sweetheart?" She stroked the back of my neck, careful not to touch my wig.

"It was great, Mom," I said with my best school-spirit smile plastered on my face.

"You look a little tired, Rell." She had one of her oh-my-poor-baby looks on her face.

I tossed my backpack on the floor. "A little," I said. "Not much."

"How about a little celebration for your first day back at school?"

My mother had to "celebrate" every step on my way back to recovery.

"We can stop at McDonald's," she said.

"No thanks," I said. The only thing I could get there was an order of super-sized trouble.

"We could go to Maui Taco or Jamba Juice," she said.

"I'm really not hungry, Mom."

"You need something in your stomach," she said.

If my mother couldn't kiss cancer away, she was going to feed it to death.

"No thanks," I said.

"Not even a shake?"

"No, Mom."

"You look tired."

"I'm not tired, Mom, and I'm not hungry." What I was, was scared to death that if she continued this conversation and didn't drive away, one of my friends would come out of school and run over to the car and ask me when I was coming back to school.

"I worry about you, Rell," she said.

I was worried about me, too, but not for the same reason.

Mom took off her sunglasses and fumbled through her purse. What could she possibly be looking for? The keys were in the ignition. What else could she need?

She angled the purse toward herself and pulled out a white envelope. "Some of the people from my department sent you a card." She handed me the card.

It's too bad Hallmark hasn't come out with an "I'm sorry you had cancer, glad to see you're still alive" card. They could make a fortune.

"I love you, Rell." Mom said.

I know you love me, but will you please just get out of here! I was thinking so loud, I was sure she could hear me. *Hurry.*

"Did you get to see your friends?" She shook her purse and dug deep inside.

What could she possibly be looking for?

"Uh-huh," I answered.

"Want a piece of gum?"

I shook my head.

"Rell, do you think you can catch up on your school work?"

I wanted to scream, "Drive!" but I said, "I think so. The hospital tutor was better than I thought." Since all I was doing was lying, why not throw in another one.

She started the car. Just then, Paul Cruz banged the hood of the

car with his hand and waved. I waved back. Nate Lee was with him.

"Who's that?" she said as she put the car in gear.

"The genius who banged the car is Paul Cruz," I said.

"And the other guy?" She checked her rear view mirror and pulled away.

"Nate Lee," I said. "He's a junior."

"He's cute," she said.

"He's a junior, Mom," I said.

"Maybe he likes younger women." Mom smiled.

When my mother smiled, she was gorgeous. In real life, she was a forty-three-year-old college professor, but when she smiled, she looked like a college student—tall, thin, dark wavy hair and perfect olive skin that never had a zit.

I did inherit my mother's hair and skin, but my build was all my father's. "Athletic" is what the magazines called it. Of course, that was before my chemotherapy.

"Did you see Emi today?" she asked.

"We had lunch together." One more lie.

"And?" Mom wanted details so I gave her some.

"She met a new guy this weekend. He's some basketball player from St. Luke's." I named Emi's imaginary boyfriend Grant. I made him six-foot two-inches tall, one-hundred-eighty pounds, fair-skinned, with a mole on his left cheek.

"She's going to get him to ask her to their Spring Carnival, then she's going to dump him," I said.

"Do you have homework?" Mom asked.

"Not much."

"Did Mr. Owens talk to you?"

Mr. Owens was the school counselor.

"He told me he would give you a health room pass if you got tired," Mom said. He told me there's a cot in there where you could take a nap."

"When did he tell you that?" I asked.

"I went in to talk to him last week. Didn't he tell you?"

They talked last week. I was toast! My heart moved from my chest to my throat, and it was quickly working its way to my mouth.

"He was supposed to give you some paperwork that I have to mail to Stanhope."

I was dead meat.

"Rell." She looked over to me as she was driving. "Are you listening?"

Oh, yeah. I'm listening.

"Mr. Owens was out sick today." I hoped my lie was true.

Mom kept going with her questions. "Did you thank everyone for their cards?" she asked.

"Yup." I smiled. "I thanked everyone I saw."

But mainly I thanked the guy at McDonald's who kept filling my Coke and felt sorry for me when I told him I had cancer and I didn't go to school.

All the way home Mom asked me one question after another, and I gave her one good lie after another: Did you remember to pick up your form for your yearbook picture? Did you meet the exchange student from Brazil? Did you notice the new plumeria trees that the parents planted? And the big question, Did anyone say anything to upset you?

I was sick of questions. I craved a day with no questions—no questions, no charts, no poking, no prodding, no asking me about night sweats, fever, appetite loss or how my bowel movements were. I wanted one day when no one cared if I were hungry, tired, constipated, or dead.

I decided on asking her questions. Dad always said the best defense is a good offense.

"How was school for you?" I asked her.

"Terrific." She smiled. "Dr. Kosaki assigned me all online classes

next semester, too. This way when we go back to Stanhope for your follow-up tests, or if anything happens, I can teach from there like I did this semester.”

I knew I would be going back to Stanhope every six months for checkups, but I also knew what “if anything happens” meant. It meant if the cancer comes back.

I slouched down, crossed my arms, closed my eyes, and pretended to be asleep. It did not work. Mom kept talking.

“What about math class?” she asked. “You’ve always had trouble with math.”

“Math class is okay,” I said.

“Dad has an intern from the university working for him. He’s an engineering student. I’m sure he could help you with your math.”

Great. A geek engineer-wannabe who would spy for my father while he tutored me.

“I’ll think about it,” I said. Three more blocks and we would be home.

“You’re not very strong in math, Rell.”

I didn’t answer. I kept my eyes closed until I felt us turn into our driveway and heard Mom turn off the engine.

“Just once I’d like the paper in the driveway instead of under the hedge.” She sighed. Mom’s an Olympic-caliber sigher.

“I’ll get it,” I said.

The paper was deep under the mock orange hedge. The ground around it was covered with wilted confetti petals that smelled so strong it was almost too sweet. I loved the smell of mock orange; it was one of the things I missed when I was in San Francisco.

When I was at Stanhope, a girl named LB was my best friend. She was a third-go-round patient. Sometimes, after her chemotherapy treatment, she thought her skin smelled like her chemo drugs, and she’d cry. That’s when I told her about the smell of mock orange, and plumeria, and ginger. And when she said her

food tasted like copper, I would tell her about the taste of huli-huli chicken, straight off the grill, smelling like *kiawe*, dripping with grease, and all dark from the smoke.

"Rell," Mom called. She was leaning against the front gate. She had her briefcase clutched under her arm. Her purse was dangling off her shoulder, and she had her books in the same hand she was trying to unlatch the gate with. "Could you bring in the mail, Sweetheart?"

"Sure," I said. I wished she'd stop calling me Sweetheart.

Mom opened the gate and out came Ajax. "Get down," Mom yelled at the dog. "Get down!" Of course, he jumped on her higher, then circled her legs, and sniffed at her skirt.

She kicked the gate closed and yelled at the dog. "Ajax, this nonsense has to stop. It has to stop." She repeated herself, slower and louder, emphasizing every syllable as if the dog was supposed to know that when she talked like that it meant that he was in big trouble.

I got the mail and followed Mom and Ajax into the house. I loved Ajax—he never asked me any questions. I squatted down and let him kiss my face. "Good boy," I said.

"Rell, do not let the dog..." She was hammering out the words just like she did to Ajax.

I knew the end of the sentence. "Do not let the dog lick your face" and I knew the right answer to give her. "Okay, Mom."

Before I could answer her, the phone rang. I was sure it was Mr. Owens. *I'm dead*, I thought. Dead Girl Walking. I dropped the mail on the kitchen counter and headed straight to my room. *Ten, nine, eight, seven*. I was mentally counting down to the Mom-explosion when she found out I skipped school.

"Rell." I heard my mother's voice. "That was Emi," she said. "She's on her way over."

I'm safe, I thought.

"You've got mail here, too," she said.

I came out to get it. My mail was *Seventeen* magazine.

Mom had already sorted the mail into piles: *Construction Engineering Monthly* for Dad, an English journal for herself, and a bill from Stanhope Hospital in Dad's pile.

"I'm going to bake cookies," she said. "What are you in the mood for? Oatmeal or chocolate chips?"

"Oatmeal," I answered, and grabbed my magazine and headed right back to my room, where I was still safe.

Who knows? Maybe Mr. Owens really was out for the day.

I plopped on my bed, took off my wig, and felt the cool air on my scalp. I tossed my wig on my dresser and accidentally caught a glimpse of myself in the mirror. There I was—a blue-skinned girl with a high-gloss scalp.

When I was five years old, I pulled out all the hair on my little Lizzie doll, leaving her with a scalp of empty holes and a few strands of black rayon. I could have passed for little Lizzie's big sister.

I leafed through *Seventeen* looking for bald-headed models with no eyebrows or eyelashes, but there were none. I craved hair.

Enter my fantasy: I'm running on the beach, barefoot, wearing a flowing white dress and my hair is billowing in the breeze.

Enter my reality: I lied on my bed wallowing in self-pity until my mother called out from the kitchen, "Emi's here."

I shot up, grabbed my wig, tugged it on, and straightened it out as quickly as I could. Emi had never seen me without it. Except for my parents, no one in Hawaii had.

Emi made a grand entrance into my room. "Just where were you today, Miss Rell?" She stood at my door. Her head was cocked, and her hands were on her hips.

"Shh!" I put my finger to my lips.

"Don't shush me," she said. "I just lied my head off to your mother about your great first day back at school." She lifted her

eyebrows so high that they disappeared under her bangs. "Where were you?"

I grabbed her arm, pulled her into my room, and shut the door. "I wasn't at school."

"No fooling, Sherlock," Emi said. "The question was, 'Where were you?'"

"McDonald's," I said.

"McDonald's?" Emi repeated.

"Yeah," I said.

"All day?"

"Yup." I was finding it hard to believe it myself.

"Was it the hot guys or the cold food?" Emi asked.

"There was only one hot guy," I said. "His name is Gus. He's seventy. He's got bad breath, walks with a cane, and drives a red Miata convertible."

"Cute," Emi said and she stretched out on my bed. "Seriously, where'd you go?"

"Seriously, I was at McDonald's."

"Why?"

"I didn't want to go back to school," I said.

"And you couldn't think of anything better to do?"

"Okay, it wasn't the greatest place to hang out, but I've been sick, remember? My brain's slow."

"Right, you had cancer and now you have dreams about Ronald McD and his golden arches."

"I just couldn't face going back," I said. "When I got out of the car, and saw all those kids." I shrugged. "It felt like they were all staring at me and..." Tears dripped out of my eyes.

"You okay?" Emi asked.

"What do you think?" I twisted my mouth into a half-smile.

"Dumb question," she said.

Emi was my best friend. We met in third grade. We played on

the same soccer team, we quit Girl Scouts on the same day (our first day), and every Fourth of July I went camping with her family.

"What if, tomorrow morning, I came by and picked you up?" she said. "Then we can walk into school together."

"I don't think so," I said.

"I could pick up Sarah on the way."

I shook my head.

"The two of us could throw rose petals at your feet as you walk in." Emi was trying to cheer me up, but she was only making things worse.

"Not in the plan," I said.

"What if we got Jonathan Akana to chant you in? Imagine. Jonathan Akana in a skimpy *malo*, blowing a conch shell and the wind blowing." Emi wiggled her eyebrows. "The *malo* flies higher."

"Enough," I said.

"Come on, Rell. You need something to snap you out of it."

"I'm fine," I said.

"Right. I noticed how fine you are," she said.

I didn't answer.

Emi stood up and looked in the mirror. Of the two of us (Emi) was the pretty one—I was the smart one. I was also the short one, the one with the round dark eyes and the 34B chest (at least I used to have a chest before treatment). Emi was half-Japanese and half-Hawaiian, tall, lean, with great long hair, and teardrop onyx eyes that disappeared when she smiled.

"Wait, I've got it," she said. "We'll go shopping."

"I hate shopping, remember?" It was Emi who was the mall diva.

"Island Girls is having a close out sale," she said. "They've got boa feather earrings for seventy-five percent off."

"They should be giving them away," I said.

"All the movie stars are wearing them," she said.

Besides being a mall diva, Emi was a movie star magazine

junkie. She knew everything every celebrity was wearing, what they ate for breakfast, who they were dating, who they were cheating on. She bought everything they did—just a cheaper version.

Emi pulled her keys out of her purse, and jingled them in the air. “We could go to my house after the mall,” she said. “No one’s home.”

“No one?”

“No one.”

“Okay,” I said, and I gave her a thumbs up.