Hope Springs Eternal Book Excerpt

Chapter One

Hope Harrison's throat constricted as she listened to a gravelly voice announce the diagnosis: terminal ovarian cancer. How could that be, she wondered, especially in someone so young? She clutched her chest, removed her headset, and took a break from her medical transcription duties.

Listening to the patient's diagnosis on tape provided a wakeup call. The poor woman's medical history detailed the advanced stages of her disease and impending death. Hope's heart hammered, aware of her need to be more proactive in her own health care; she scolded herself for not seeing her doctor on a regular basis, and wondered how she'd handle the discovery of a horrific ailment.

She stood and walked to the kitchen in search of the phone list she kept in the drawer. As she grappled through the junk she'd thrown there, she made a mental note to straighten things then dialed her gynecologist's number.

"Dr. Carlson's Office," a chipper voice answered.

Hope held the phone away from her ear and rechecked the list.

"Hello? Is anyone there?" the voice asked.

"I ... I'm sorry." She studied the number again. "I thought I'd dialed the number for Dr. Smith."

"Oh, you've dialed correctly. Dr. Smith retired and transferred all his records over to Dr. Jerrod Carlson. Are you calling for an appointment?"

She took a deep breath and gathered courage. "Goodness. I guess it's been longer than I thought since I saw Doctor Smith. Yes, I do need to be seen."

God, she hated starting over with someone new. Despite her previous tenure as a practicing registered nurse, she detested anything to do with her own medical issues, especially ones that involved disrobing and being probed. She supposed her feelings were a normal human reaction. She couldn't imagine that anyone enjoyed it. She'd tried a woman doctor at one time, and it didn't help. In fact, she felt even more self-conscious at the thought of the young female comparing her own svelte body with Hope's older one.

After scheduling her appointment, Hope hung up the phone. An image of Dr. Smith's familiar face danced through her mind. Years of seeing him had provided some semblance of comfort. Knowing he had seen her naked countless times eased her modest pride. A smile caught her lips when she called the way he always warmed the speculum for her pap smear, though certainly not just for her. The added courtesy failed to lend any

consolation to hearing those familiar words, 'relax and let your knees fall apart.' Now she had to face a new doctor.
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Hope's high heels clicked against the tile floor and reverberated in the emptiness as she hurried down the medical clinic's long corridor. She glanced at her watch and grimaced. Great! Late for her appointment with her new doctor. Some first impression she'd make. The thought brought an immediate chuckle. Silly her for thinking doctors ever sat and waited for their patients.

Her moment of glee faded and her palms dampened at the prospect of the ritualistic feminine torture called an exam. On the menu today loomed the dreaded mammogram. That test had to have been developed by a man with a genuine hatred for women. Another female would never think of putting a 'sister' through such agony. She clasped her breast in anticipation and grimaced. If only she was on a beach in Hawaii instead of feeling like she was on her way to the gallows.

A slight pause before entering Dr. Carlson's suite helped fortify her for the coming trial. It seemed odd to see an unfamiliar name on the wall plaque, especially since she'd been a patient of Dr. Daniel Smith's for so many years. She blinked back tears, feeling she'd lost an old friend.

After a deep breath, she turned the knob and stopped in the doorway to gaze at the packed waiting area. All eyes turned to inspect her, sending a warming flush up her neck. With a forced smile, she crossed the ecru carpeting, wrote her name on the check-in list, and searched for an empty seat. The only remaining one was in the far corner next to the water cooler. Convenient, since the long walk from the parking lot left her feeling parched.

Hope traversed the room, avoiding the crossed and puffy feet clogging the aisle. It appeared she was the only person there who wasn't pregnant ... and clearly the oldest. Why didn't OB/GYN doctors have separate waiting rooms? She felt like the lone spotted pup in a litter of black ones, only not quite so cute.

Rather than leave her chair, she stretched across the armrest to fill a cup. The water soothed her dry throat but did little to quell the nervous feeling in her stomach. Despite being familiar with the process, it still made her queasy. She glanced at the door and took the last sip of water, fighting the urge to leave.

Her gaze searched for and found the trash receptacle about six feet away. Not eager to become the object of unwanted stares again, or lose her seat, she wadded the pleated paper into a ball and risked a rim shot at the can. Luckily, the cup teetered on the wastebasket's edge then fell inside. Another woman watched from the other side of the room. Hope shrugged her shoulders and flashed a childlike grin, then sheepishly picked up a magazine. While she absentmindedly thumbed through the pages, her gaze wandered to the swollen belly of the young lady next to her.

A pang of sadness stabbed at Hope's heart. The girl probably had a husband ... and a home that would soon hold a complete family. Thoughts of Alan, her beloved husband taken three years ago in an automobile accident, blurred Hope's eyes. Although she'd prayed for children for years, they'd never been able to conceive. Evidently God hadn't heard her pleas.

At forty-nine and a widow, the parent ship sailed long ago. The only baby in her life was Chloe, her Maltese puppy. She blew an upward stream of air to dry her eyes then surveyed the crowd. Opening the magazine again, she settled in for a long wait.

The reception window opened with a squeal reminiscent of fingernails on a blackboard. She shivered and flashed back to grammar school--an amazing recollection given the time passed.

"Hope Harrison?" the woman behind the counter called.

Hope went to the window. "That's me."

The gray-haired receptionist handed her a clipboard. "I need you to fill this out. Since you're a new patient, we need to update your file."

"But ... but I'm not new, the doctor is."

The elder woman clearly forced an impatient smile. "Well, dear, you're new to the doctor, so please..."

Hope accepted the form and turned in time to see someone claiming her seat. Her feet hurt from being stuffed into pretentious shoes she never should have worn, and now she had no place to sit.

She glanced around the room, counting patients. How many did this doctor see in a day? The wait would take forever. Maybe she should reschedule. There! She'd found the reason she needed. Stacks of tapes at home were in need of transcription. Just as she convinced herself to take flight, a nurse appeared in the doorway and summoned her.

Hope's eyes widened. How could that be? She'd been one of the last to arrive. She waved the clipboard at the woman. "But, I haven't completed my form yet."

"That's okay. Follow me and you can finish in the exam room."

They stopped first at the scale. Hope grimaced, but stepped on and closed her eyes. Her efforts to remain in the dark were for naught when the nurse announced her weight for all to hear. Hope's cheeks warmed, but at least she knew why her clothes felt a little tighter. She'd gained fifteen pounds since last time she'd stepped on a scale. When had that been?

The nurse motioned toward an open door.

Hope sat in the lone chair and completed her paperwork. Her eyes occasionally wandered to the draped table and waiting stirrups; dread gnawed at her. She still had time to leave. But, with a deep breath, she squared her shoulders. Fleeing was a preferable choice, not an option. It wasn't like she was the only woman in the world who endured this torture. Besides, what could be worse than finding out she didn't weigh one-twenty-five anymore? She'd weighed that since her wedding. Visions of Jenny Craig and NutriSystem flashed through her mind.

"Be brave," the little angel on her right shoulder whispered in her ear. She turned a deaf ear to the little devil on her left shoulder who encouraged her to run like the wind.

She stood and placed her completed form on the counter next to the small stainless-steel sink. How many times had she washed her hands in one just like it? But, that was another life and time. Her nursing career ended when Alan died.

The nurse's presence interrupted her reverie. "I need to get your vitals." She recorded blood pressure and temperature in a chart, then thrust a gown at Hope. "Remove all your clothing and put this on. The doctor will be with you shortly." She left, closing the door behind her. Hope wondered if her own nursing persona had been as devoid of warmth.

She knew the drill. Leave the opening in front for the breast exam and cover with the drape. Hope picked up the flimsy blue plastic, shook it out to its full length and stretched it across the exam table. How many times had she laid out one just like it for a patient? Funny, she'd forgotten how small they were.

Her feet ached. "Ah, what a relief." She sighed, kicking off her high-heels.

She wiggled her toes and vowed this would be the last time she'd put her feet through the agony. Her fingers worked against her as she unbuttoned her blouse, removed it and hung it on the back of the chair. She unfastened her skirt and shimmied out of it to a bawdy tune in her head, urging her to 'take it all off.' She felt certain her laughter sounded in the hallway. Who in their right mind would pay her to strip? Nobody she knew of. The thought saddened her for a moment, but she cheered, remembering the way Alan always lit up when she undressed for him. It wasn't that long ago.

She smoothed her skirt and draped it over her shirt, then perched on the edge of the chair and peeled off her panty hose. Why in the world she'd gone to the trouble to dress up remained a mystery. The majority of her time was spent in comfortable sweats--one of the perks to working from home. It wasn't like anyone cared how she looked.

Maybe she gussied up today because her social life had died along with her husband, and she had a closet full of clothes crying to be worn. That was probably it. Any outing provided a reason to veer from the norm.

"I'm pathetic," she muttered, and stripped off her black panties and bra.

She stuffed them and her hosiery inside her shoes, and tucked them under the chair. She liked sexy lingerie but wasn't an exhibitionist. Wearing black was an old habit she'd acquired to please her husband, and she wasn't ready for 'granny panties' yet. Standing in the nude, those annoying goose bumps returned, this time spreading across her backside. Was it really necessary to keep the examining rooms so cold?

Hope donned the gown, reached behind to clutch the ends together, and climbed up on the table. The stiff paper covering crinkled and stuck to her skin. She exhaled a pent-up breath and reminded herself this would all be over in just a short time. Why did she feel like a prisoner waiting for a lethal injection? It was quite different being the person to hand out the gown over being the one wearing it.

She crossed and uncrossed her ankles trying to find a comfortable position. The blood supply to her feet became stilted by the bend of her knees pressing on the table's edge and her legs dangling in midair; within a few minutes, her toes turned numb. She was about to step down when footsteps paused outside and someone rapped on the door.

"Come in." It wasn't what she really wanted to say.

"Ms. Harrison?" A deep, resonating voice preceded the doctor into the room.