

1 A M Y

DADDY SAID, “LET MOM GO FIRST.”

Mom wanted me to go first. I think it was because she was afraid that after they were contained and frozen, I’d walk away, return to life rather than consign myself to that cold, clear box. But Daddy insisted.

“Amy needs to see what it’s like. You go first, let her watch. Then she can go and I’ll be with her. I’ll go last.”

“You go first,” Mom said. “I’ll go last.”

But the long and the short of it is that you have to be naked, and neither of them wanted me to see either of them naked (not like I wanted to see them in all their nude glory, gross), but given the choice, it’d be best for Mom to go first, since we had the same parts and all.

She looked so skinny after she undressed. Her collarbone stood out more; her skin had that rice-paper-thin, over-moisturized consistency old people’s skin has. Her stomach—a part of her she always kept hidden under clothes—sagged in a wrinkly sort of way that made her look even more vulnerable and weak.

The men who worked in the lab seemed uninterested in my mother’s nudity, just as they were impartial to my and my father’s presence. They

helped her lie down in the clear cryo box. It would have looked like a coffin, but coffins have pillows and look a lot more comfortable. This looked more like a shoebox.

“It’s cold,” Mom said. Her pale white skin pressed flat against the bottom of the box.

“You won’t feel it,” the first worker grunted. His nametag said Ed.

I looked away as the other worker, Hassan, pierced Mom’s skin with the IV needles. One in her left arm, hooked up at the crease of her inner elbow; one in her right hand, protruding from that big vein below her knuckles.

“Relax,” Ed said. It was an order, not a kind suggestion.

Mom bit her lip.

The stuff in the IV bag did not flow like water. It rolled like honey. Hassan squeezed the bag, forcing it down the IV faster. It was sky blue, like the blue of the cornflowers Jason had given me at prom.

My mom hissed in pain. Ed removed a yellow plastic clamp on the empty IV in her elbow. A backflow of bright red blood shot through the IV, pouring into the bag. Mom’s eyes filled with water. The blue goo from the other IV glowed, a soft sparkle of sky shining through my mother’s veins as the goo traveled up her arm.

“Gotta wait for it to hit the heart,” Ed said, glancing at us. Daddy clenched his fists, his eyes boring into my mom. Her eyes were clamped shut, two hot tears dangling on her lashes.

Hassan squeezed the bag of blue goo again. A line of blood trickled from under Mom’s teeth where she was biting her lip.

“This stuff, it’s what makes the freezing work.” Ed spoke in a conversational tone, like a baker talking about how yeast makes bread rise. “Without it, little ice crystals form in the cells and split open the cell walls. This

stuff makes the cell walls stronger, see? Ice don't break 'em." He glanced down at Mom. "Hurts like a bitch going in, though."

Her face was pale, and she was lying in that box, and she wasn't moving at all, as if moving would break her. She already looked dead.

"I wanted you to see this," Daddy whispered. He didn't look at me—he was still staring at Mom. He didn't even blink.

"Why?"

"So you knew before you did it."

Hassan kept kneading the bag of blue goo. Mom's eyes rolled up into the back of her head for a minute, and I thought she'd pass out, but she didn't.

"Almost there," Ed said, looking at the bag of Mom's blood. The flow had slowed down.

The only sound was Hassan's heavy breathing as he rubbed the plastic sides of the bag of goo. And whimpering, soft, like a dying kitten, coming from Mom.

A faint blue glow sparkled in the IV leading from Mom's elbow.

"Okay, stop," Ed said. "It's all in her blood now."

Hassan pulled the IVs out. Mom let out a crackling sigh.

Daddy pulled me forward. Looking down at Mom reminded me of looking down at Grandma last year at the church, when we all said good-bye and Mom said she was in a better place, but all she meant was that she was dead.

"How is it?" I asked.

"Not bad," Mom lied. At least she could still speak.

"Can I touch her?" I asked Ed. He shrugged, so I reached out, gripped the fingers of her left hand. They were already ice cold. She didn't squeeze back.

“Can we get on with it?” Ed asked. He shook a big eyedropper in his hand.

Daddy and I stepped back, but not so far that Mom would think we’d left her in that icy coffin alone. Ed pulled Mom’s eyes open. His fingers were big, calloused, and they looked like rough-hewn logs spreading apart my mom’s paper-thin eyelids. A drop of yellow liquid fell on each green eye. Ed did it quickly—*drop, drop*—then he sort of pushed her eyes shut. She didn’t open them again.

I guess I looked shocked, because when Ed glanced up at me this time, he actually stopped working long enough to give me a comforting smile. “Keeps her from going blind,” he said.

“It’s okay,” Mom said from her shoebox coffin. Even though her eyes were sealed shut, I could hear the tears in her voice.

“Tubes,” Ed said, and Hassan handed him a trio of clear plastic tubes. “Okay, look.” Ed leaned down close to Mom’s face. “I’m gonna put these down your throat. It’s not gonna feel good. Try to act like you’re swallowin’ ’em.”

Mom nodded and opened her mouth. Ed crammed the tubes down her throat. Mom gagged, a violent motion that started at her belly and worked all the way up to her dry, cracked lips.

I glanced at Daddy. His eyes were cold and hard.

It was a long time before she became still and silent. She kept trying to swallow, the muscles in her neck rearranging themselves to accommodate the tubes. Ed threaded the tubes up through a hole in the top of the shoebox coffin, near Mom’s head. Hassan opened a drawer and pulled out a mess of electrical wires. He stuffed a bundle of brightly colored wires down the first tube, then one long black cable with a small box at the end down the second one, and finally a small rectangular black piece of plastic that looked like a

solar panel attached to a fiber-optic string down the last. Hassan plugged all the wires into a little white box that Ed fixed over the hole at the top of what I realized was nothing more than an elaborate packing crate.

“Say goodbye.” I looked up, surprised at the kind voice. Ed had his back to us, typing something into a computer; it was Hassan who spoke. He nodded at me encouragingly.

Daddy had to pull my arm to make me approach Mom. This . . . this was not the last image of her I wanted. Yellow crusting her eyes, tubes holding wires crammed down her throat, a soft sky-blue sheen pumping through her veins. Daddy kissed her, and Mom smiled a bit around the tubes. I patted her on the shoulder. It was cold too. She gurgled something at me, and I leaned in closer. Three sounds, three spluttering grunts, really. I squeezed Mom’s arm. I knew the words she was trying to get past the tubes were, “I love you.”

“Momma,” I whispered, stroking her paper-soft skin. I’d not called her anything but Mom since I was seven.

“Kay, that’s it,” Ed said. Daddy’s hand snaked into the crook of my elbow, and he tugged at me gently. I jerked away. He changed tactics and gripped my shoulder, spinning me against his hard, muscled chest in a tight hug, and I didn’t resist this time. Ed and Hassan lifted up what looked like a hospital’s version of a fire hose, and water flecked with sky-blue sparkles filled the shoebox coffin. Mom spluttered when it reached her nose.

“Just breathe it in,” Ed shouted over the sound of rushing liquid. “Just relax.”

A stream of bubbles shot through the blue water, obscuring her face. She shook her head, denying the water the chance to drown her, but a moment later, she gave up. The liquid covered her. Ed turned off the hose and the ripples faded. The water was still. She was still.

Ed and Hassan lowered the shoebox coffin lid over Mom. They pushed the box into the rear wall, and only when they closed it behind a little door on the wall did I notice all the little doors in the wall, like a morgue. They pulled the handle down. A hiss of steam escaped through the door—the flash freezing process was over. One second Mom was there, and the next, everything about her that made her Mom was frozen and stagnant. She was as good as dead for the next three centuries until someone opened that door and woke her up.

“The girl’s next?” Ed asked.

I stepped forward, balling my hands into fists so they wouldn’t shake.

“No,” Daddy said.

Without waiting for Daddy’s response, Ed and Hassan were already preparing another shoebox coffin. They didn’t care whether it was me or him; they were just doing their job.

“What?” I asked Daddy.

“I’m going next. Your mother wouldn’t agree to that—she thought you’d still back down, decide not to come with us. Well, I’m giving you that option. I’m going next. Then, if you’d like to walk away, not be frozen, that’s okay. I’ve told your aunt and uncle. They’re waiting outside; they’ll be there until five. After they freeze me, you can just walk away. Mom and I won’t know, not for centuries, not till we wake up, and if you do decide to live instead of being frozen, then we’ll be okay.”

“But, Daddy, I—”

“No. It’s not fair for us to guilt you into this. It’ll be easier for you to make an honest decision if you do it without facing us.”

“But I promised you. I promised Mom.” My voice cracked. My eyes burned painfully, and I squeezed them shut. Two hot trails of tears leaked down my face.

“Doesn’t matter. That’s too big of a promise for us to make you keep. You have to make this choice yourself—if you want to stay here, I understand. I’m giving you a way out.”

“But they don’t need you! You could stay here with me! You’re not even important to the mission—you’re with the military for Pete’s sake! How is a battlefield analyst supposed to help on a new planet? You could stay here, you could be—”

Daddy shook his head.

“—with me,” I whispered, but there was no point in asking him to stay. His mind was made up. And it wasn’t true, anyway. Daddy was sixth in command, and while that didn’t exactly make him commander in chief, it was still pretty high up. Mom was important too; no one was better at genetic splicing, and they needed her to help develop crops that could grow on the new planet.

I was the only one not needed.

Daddy went behind the curtain and undressed, and when he came out, Ed and Hassan let him use a hand towel to cover himself as he walked to the cryo chamber. They took it away when he lay down, and I forced my eyes to stare at his face, to not make this worse for either of us. But his face radiated pain, a look I had never seen Daddy wear before. It made my insides twist with even more fear, more doubt. I watched them plug the two IVs in. I watched them seal his eyes. I tried to retreat within myself, silence the scream of horror reverberating in my mind, and stand straight with a spine made of iron and a face made of stone. Then Daddy squeezed my hand, once, hard, as they crammed the tubes down his throat, and I crumbled, inside and out.

Before they filled his box with the blue-speckled liquid, Daddy held up his hand, his pinky finger sticking out. I wrapped my own pinky around

his. I knew that with it, he was promising everything would be okay. And I almost believed him.

I cried so hard when they filled his cryo chamber up I couldn't see his face as it drowned in the liquid. Then they lowered the lid, slammed him in his mortuary, and a puff of white steam escaped through the cracks.

"Can I see him?" I asked.

Ed and Hassan looked at each other. Hassan shrugged. Ed jerked the lever of the little door open again and pulled out the clear shoebox coffin.

And there was Daddy. The translucent liquid was frozen solid and, I knew, so was Daddy. I put my hand on the glass, wishing there was a way to feel his warmth through the ice, but I snatched it away quickly. The glass was so cold it burned. Green lights blinked on the little electric box Hassan had fixed to the top of Daddy's cryotube.

He didn't look like Daddy under the ice.

"So," Ed said, "are you going under, or are you leaving the party early?" He pushed Daddy's shoebox coffin back into its little slot in the wall.

When I looked up at Ed, my eyes were so watery that his face sort of melted, and he looked a bit like a Cyclops. "I . . ."

My eyes slid to the exit, past all the cryo equipment on the other side of the room. Beyond that door were my aunt and uncle, who I loved, who I could be happy living with. And beyond them was Jason. And Rebecca and Heather and Robyn and all my friends. And the mountains, the flowers, the sky. Earth. Beyond that door was Earth. And life.

But my eyes drifted to the little doors on the wall. Beyond those doors were my momma and daddy.

I cried as I undressed. The first boy who ever saw me naked was Jason, just that one time, the night I found out I would leave behind everything

on Earth, and everything included him. I did not like the idea that the last boys to see me naked on this planet would be Ed and Hassan. I tried to cover myself with my arms and hands, but Ed and Hassan made me remove them so they could put the IVs in.

And, oh god, it was worse than Mom made it look. Oh, god. Oh, *God*. It was cold and it was burning all at the same time. I could feel my muscles straining as that blue goo entered my system. My heart wanted to *pound*, beat upon my ribcage like a lover beating on the door, but the blue goo made it do the opposite and sloooow down so that instead of *beatbeatbeat-beat*, it went *beat . . . beat . . .*

. . . *beat* . . .

. . .

. . .

. . . *beat* . . .

. . .

Ed jerked my eyelids open. *Plop!* Cold yellow liquid filled my eyes, sealing them like gum. *Plop!*

I was blind now.

One of them, maybe Hassan, tapped on my chin, and I opened my mouth obediently. Apparently, not wide enough—the tubes hit my teeth. I opened wider.

And then the tubes were forced down my throat, hard. They did not feel as flexible as they had looked; they felt like a greased broomstick being crammed down my mouth. I gagged, and gagged again. I could taste bile and copper around the plastic of the tubes.

“Swallow it!” Ed shouted in my ear. “Just relax!”

Easy for him to say.

A few moments after it was done, my stomach tingled. I could feel the

wires inside me being pulled and tugged as Hassan plugged the little black box to the outside of my very own shoebox coffin.

Shuffling noises. The hose.

“Don’t know why anyone would sign up for this,” said Hassan.

Silence.

A metallic sound—the hose being opened up. Cold, cold liquid splashed on my thighs. I wanted to move my hands to cover myself *there*, but my body was sluggish.

“I dunno,” Ed said. “Things ain’t exactly peachy here now. Nothing’s been right since the first recession, let alone the second. The Financial Resource Exchange was s’posed to bring more jobs, wasn’t it? Ain’t got nothing now other than this P.O.S. job, and it’ll be over soon as they’re all frozen.”

Another silence. The cryo liquid washed over my knees now, seeping cold into the places on my body that had been warm—the crease of my knees, under my arms, under my breasts.

“Not worth giving your life away, not for what they’re offering.”

Ed snorted. “What they’re offering? They’re offering a lifetime’s salary, all in one check.”

“Ain’t worth nothing on a ship that won’t land for three hundred and one years.”

My heart stopped. *Three hundred . . . and one? No—that’s wrong. It’s three hundred years even. Not three hundred and one.*

“That much money can sure help a family out. Might make the difference.”

“What difference?” Hassan asked.

“Difference between surviving or not. It’s not like when we were kids. Don’t care what the prez says, that Financial Act ain’t gonna be able to fix this kinda debt.”

What are they yammering about? Who cares about national debt and jobs? Go back to that extra year!

“A man has time to think about it anyway,” Ed continued. “Consider his options. Why’d they delay the launch again?”

Cryo liquid splashed against my ears as my shoebox coffin filled; I lifted my head.

Delay? What delay? I tried to speak around the tubes, but they filled my mouth, crowded my tongue, silenced my words.

“I have no idea. Something about the fuel and feedback from the probes. But why are they making us keep all the freezing on schedule?”

The cryo liquid was rising fast. I turned my head, so my right ear could catch their conversation.

“Who cares?” Ed asked. “Not them—they’ll just sleep through it all. They say the ship’ll take three hundred years just to get to that other planet—what’s the difference in one more year?”

I tried to sit up. My muscles were hard, slow, but I struggled. I tried to talk again, make a sound, any sound, but the cryo liquid was spilling over my face.

“Just. Relax,” Ed said very loudly near my face.

I shook my head. God, didn’t they *know*? A year made the world of difference! This was one more year I could be with Jason, one more year I could *live*! I signed up for three hundred years . . . not three hundred and one!

Gentle hands—Hassan’s?—pushed me under the cryo liquid. I held my breath. I tried to rise up. I wanted my year! My last year—one more year!

“Breathe in the liquid!” Ed’s voice sounded muffled, almost indecipherable under the cryo liquid. I tried to shake my head, but as my neck

muscles tensed, my lungs rebelled, and the cold, cold cryo liquid rushed down my nose, past the tubes, and into my body.

I felt the finality of the lid trapping me inside my Snow White coffin.

As one of them pushed at my feet, sliding me into my morgue, I imagined that my Prince Charming was just beyond my little door, that he really could come and kiss me awake and we could have a whole year more together.

There was a *click, click, grrr* of gears, and I knew the flash freezing would start in mere moments, and then my life would be nothing but a puff of white steam leaking through the cracks of my morgue door.

And I thought: *At least I'll sleep. I will forget, for three hundred and one years, everything else.*

And then I thought: *That will be nice.*

And then *whoosh!* The flash freeze filled the tiny chamber. I was in ice. I was ice.

I *am* ice.

But if I'm ice, how am I conscious? I was supposed to be asleep; I was supposed to forget about Jason and life and Earth for three hundred and one years. People have been cryo frozen before me, and none of them were conscious. The *mind* is frozen; it cannot be awake or aware.

I've read before of coma victims who were supposed to be knocked out with anesthesia during an operation, but really they were awake and felt everything.

I hope—I *pray*—that's not me. I can't be awake for three hundred and one years. I'll never survive that.

Maybe I'm dreaming now. I've dreamt a lifetime in a thirty-minute

nap. Maybe I'm still in that space between frozen and not, and this is all a dream. Maybe we haven't left Earth yet. Maybe I'm still in that limbo year before the ship launches, and I'm stuck, trapped in a dream I can't wake from.

Maybe I've still got three hundred and one years stretching out before me.

Maybe I'm not even asleep yet. Not all the way.

Maybe, maybe, maybe.

I only know one thing for certain.

I want my year back.