

Alex's skin was surprisingly warm. The sterile white and silver of the gurney made him seem vibrant and solid, much more so than the washed out photographs of him that she'd been staring at for years. "I thought he'd be paler. Maybe gray," said Lisa.

The tech glanced up from her monitor. "He's at the end of his recovery process. They don't really get that pale anyway. Not blue like in our commercials. Marketing found that people got nervous about the cryo chambers if it didn't look--"

"I know our marketing techniques. Whose name do you think that is above the door of this building?" snapped Lisa. The tech flushed and Lisa immediately regretted losing her temper.

"Of course, Mrs. Sabri."

*She's helping you, she told herself. Be kind.* "I just haven't seen a recovery in a while. And the last time I saw him..." She shook off the thought and tried to soothe the tech's embarrassment with an easy question. "Have the scans come back yet?"

"Almost all of them. I feel confident saying he's healthy. Most of his systems are functioning on their own now. Many of the life support devices have been turned off-- in a few hours we'll remove the feeding tube, as soon as the doctor clears it. About an hour after that, the sedatives should be wearing off and--" the tech shrugged with a cautious smile, "and your husband will wake up."

Lisa played with the pair of rings on her hand.

"He can likely hear you now, if you'd like to talk to him." The tech shook her head and blushed. "Of course you know that already. I'm sorry. Force of habit."

Lisa nodded and sank down into the seat beside the bed, touching Alex's arm again, feeling the spring of his skin and the coarse hairs beneath her fingertips. It kept her from confusing the moment with a dream. The tech switched off the monitor and slipped out of the room. Lisa sat for a few moments, thinking of the other hospital rooms they'd been in. The endless parade of anonymous, astringent spaces where he'd slept or tried to, and she'd read tattered magazines she had no interest in. Or the worn out vinyl chairs where he'd sat through hours and hours of chemo, the sound of other patients' televisions chattering down the hall and her staring blankly into space while he dozed. All the rooms where she'd just *waited*. Helpless to do anything for him and unwilling to just let him stay alone. It had been so many years since she'd felt that impotence, but here it was again. Unfair that the memory of it returned so quickly and was so sharp and stark when all the others of him, the happy memories, were fuzzy and loose. Unfair that she had to work so hard even to call them to mind anymore.

The last one, the saddest one, was so crisp. She'd relived it so often, but it never warped like others, it never lost its

shape or definition. He'd been lying on a gurney just like this one, though that room had been tiny. His suit had been too big. A relic from when he'd been healthy, before he'd been whittled down to sharp angles and hollows by illness. She'd picked out the suit wanting to remember him as he'd been in happier times. Instead, it made him look even more wan and frail than she was used to. It was almost a relief when the tech had him remove the jacket and roll up his shirt sleeve to place the iv.

"Try to relax," the tech had told Alex. He'd gripped Lisa's hand and stared at her, the way he always did when there was a needle.

"Don't cry," he'd told her. "It's just a long nap."

She nodded, but her eyes were already blurring.

"You should give her your ring," said the tech quietly. "We'll send everything else, but small things like that— it's better to do it now."

Alex waited until the iv was secure and then slid the band from his hand. It let go far too easily, loose around his skinny finger. Lisa held out her hand and he pressed it into her palm. "You remember what you promised," he said. "I want to dream of you in that yellow dress."

"No, I didn't—"

"Yes. I'm giving this back to you because I love you. No more waiting for me. Not in doctors' offices. Not in hospital rooms. And not in here. Do the wonderful things I know you always meant to. Let me imagine you *happy*. If I wake up, and you're saying good morning to someone else that day, it'll still be the sweetest dream."

She shook her head. "I'll be here, Alex. I'll be right here when you wake up."

She leaned over to kiss him. He brushed her cheeks with his hand. His fingers were hot. Far too hot to freeze. "Don't wait for me, Li. There's so much I want for you to do, to see. The sun's going to rise for you tomorrow. And the day after. And the one after that. There's only ice and night in here. Don't get caught in it too."

"I love you," she said, kissing him to stop the argument she didn't want to have. "Good night, Alex."

He stared at her face a few moments more as the drug took effect. "Good night, Lisa," he slurred and shut his eyes. The tech waited a few moments as she stared at him and then coughed lightly. She looked up.

"We have to start the process now," the tech warned her. "Most family members prefer not to watch." She'd hesitated and the tech took her hand. "It's better not to. He'll be safe, it's just not the way you are used to seeing him."

She'd allowed him to lead her out of the room, glancing back at her husband's sleeping form once more before the door closed. It had been the very last time she'd seen him.

She shook off the memory and cleared her throat. "I've never been much good at talking, you know that. I'm afraid it's only gotten worse since you've been asleep, but I'll try. Been saving up my side of the conversation for some time now, so maybe it won't be as hard as I think. There are some things you should know. But we've got time. At least a few more hours, the doctor says. And then you can ask me all the questions you want." Her thumb rubbed his wrist gently. She was still nervous that his skin would tear, a fragile film over a block of ice.

*Ridiculous*, she told herself, *you know how this whole thing works. How many of these have happened on your watch?* She pressed her lips together, irritated at the slight stickiness of her lipstick. She wanted to wipe it off. *I look silly. Old. Out of place. But it's Alex's favorite shade.* She pressed the nervousness down. "What I wanted to tell you first, you already know," she said. "I wanted to tell you that I've missed you. That I love you. Maybe you forgot in there. Maybe the ice pushed it out of your dreams.

"But you couldn't forget, could you? Your memories— stopped. Bright and sharp, as if the last time I told you that I loved you were just this morning. As if you'd only lain on the hospital bed a moment ago and I just kissed you. Maybe you still imagine you feel the tingle on your lips from it. Those thoughts frozen with the rest of you. It's only my own memories that fade and drift like old flags in the sun. Strange. So strange. Perhaps it's because I use them so often, those memories. Take them out like old photographs or a lucky coin, turning them over and over until all the details wear away." She threaded her fingers through his. "The first time I held your hand. That one is still clear. It was that wedding reception. I only knew Jody. And you knew— everyone. You always did. We talked for twenty minutes while the photographer struggled with the rain. And I thought that was it. I found you pleasant but in a bland sort of way. The same as any other polite stranger. I'm sure I struck you the same. But then, when Jody's drunk cousin cornered me near the bathrooms, you appeared again. I remember you in that odd pink and orange light from the dance floor, that brittle smile plastered over your face. And you slid your hand into mine just as the guy was reaching out to grab my thigh. And you said, 'Feeling better, darling? I know how salmon upsets your stomach.' And I tried not to laugh at the man's horrified expression as you led me away. You dropped my hand as soon as we turned the corner and apologized. At the time— I was relieved. But *afterward*, I thought of this hand an awful lot, Alex. More than I ever admitted." She let go, laying his fingers on the sheet again. "I never told you this— I was so excited when you called a week later that I forgot everything you said. It's only because Marie was with me and listening that I knew where and when to show up for our date."

She smiled at her own foolishness, folded her hands in her lap. "I've thought of you every day. Not constantly, not obsessively. I used to, you know. There were a few months— or longer, where I didn't sleep. That was bad, but it bled away eventually. Dried up. Like an old scratch finally scabbed over. Just like you said it would. But after that— you crop up in the oddest moments. Holidays and anniversaries, they aren't so bad anymore. The shock's worn off. It's always the small things that I stumble over now. Your recipe for chocolate cake. I haven't been able to find it for years. I don't eat chocolate cake anymore. It just makes me cry. Someone was wearing your cologne in the library last week an aisle from me. I forgot for a moment that it couldn't be you and dropped what I was doing to look, but they'd gone by the time I turned the corner. It shouldn't surprise me anymore, but it does, every time. As if someone stabbed right through that same scab. Last year, the cat knocked your favorite mug off the window sill. It should have been a simple thing, swept away into the recycling and forgotten. It wasn't. I made the cat stay on the porch for two days and couldn't sleep myself. I saved the shards in a box, just sharp puzzle pieces now, but still yours, so I couldn't get rid of it. I take it out every few weeks and try to piece it back together but... well, maybe you'll do it in a day or two." She caught a glimpse of herself in the glass of the window beyond the bed and turned away slightly. "Or perhaps you'll decide you don't need the things from before any longer."

She listened to the soft clicks of the machines still supporting him, staring at the package of folded clothing she'd laid at the foot of the bed. The colors were washed out and the fabric smelled of the cedar chips she'd packed them in. Everything was faded from that time. Diminished. Even her. He was the only thing that remained, too rich, too solid as if he were more alive than everything around him. A time traveler who'd been here the entire time. She'd have to tell him at last, she knew, but how could she even begin to explain? She had a panicked wish that she hadn't asked everyone to go, that someone would sail in needing her to solve some crisis, answer a call, sign a document. Anything but be here, where she'd most wanted to be for decades. She played with her rings again, then took a deep breath and began.

"I want you to know, it's going to be fine. Remember that. You're going to be fine. The cancer is gone, they declared your body clear of any rogue cells two years ago. All the scans since have shown the same. You have a long and healthy life ahead. The house is— well, we can talk about opening it again when you wake up. I kept it for today, for this moment. I moved closer to the cryo facility some time ago. It was easier for work. At least, that's what I told everyone. In reality, it was so that I could visit whenever I chose. So I could stay when only the midnight techs wandered blearily through the hallways. I— know it didn't

make a difference to you. I know you couldn't hear me until now. But it made a difference to me. In a few days, when we release you, we can decide on living arrangements."

They'd been furtive, compressed visits. Times she felt foolish but needed to be near him anyway. Talking quietly to a towering, featureless cylinder that never had any answers for her. For the first few years, there'd only been a few other tanks. And a solitary tech or two to avoid. Now it was the heart of an enormous grid. Tank 3 of two hundred. Shining steel tombs waiting for a resurrection day. She had visited a silver tank once a week for years, always frightened that they'd mixed him up, that he wasn't even in it, that she'd been pouring her heart out to the wrong freezer. As if it mattered. How did she know? Maybe it did. Maybe her voice had leaked, cracking and distant through the icy sludge of the tank to reach him. She shook herself. This wasn't what she'd meant to tell him.

"I'm sorry, I've got everything muddled. Probably none of this makes sense. Just— remember you're going to be fine. In all the ways I could assure it. All the financial arrangements are made. The medical decisions triple checked. Rehabilitation and occupation training— they're all set up already. So I don't want you to worry. Because I need to tell you something hard now." She squeezed his arm again. She wished he could respond. Give her some sign. Any signal that he could hear. So she wouldn't have to endure this dread all over again if she had to repeat herself. So she could be prepared for his reaction when he opened his eyes. Would she be an utter stranger to him? Something shameful? To be turned away and forgotten after all this time?

"Things— didn't go as we'd planned, Alex. The research to find a treatment took longer than anyone expected. For a while, the cryo recovery was— painful and the survival rate was very low. Even now, after all this time, it's still a small risk. But to see you again— our doctors say your case is one of the best candidates we've ever had for recovery. And so, a few months ago, we decided to start the process. To think, only one more day until I can hear your voice. It has been too long, my love. So long. I know we talked about you being here for five years, perhaps ten. It has been much longer. Your body is still thirty-seven. But mine— mine is sixty-three." She stared at the sharp lines of the bones in her hands, the loose skin around her knuckles. She wasn't used to thinking of herself as old. Wasn't particularly used to thinking of herself at all. Not in a physical way. It had been a long time since it had mattered. Five years since the last lover. Three since the last time she'd had to do a press tour for the facility. She tried to pull the thoughts back, tried not to focus on how she must appear more like Alex's mother than his contemporary.

"That must be a shock. I wish I were better at preparing you. I wish I were better at preparing myself. It's still a

strange thing to know, though I've had almost thirty years to get used to the idea of you *paused* in there— did any time at all pass for you? Were you mid-thought when the sedative made you slip under? Or did you dream all this time? Did you spend your years wondering what was happening in the world? Is your mind the one that I fell in love with or are you someone different now? Am I?"

He'd been too thin when he went in the tank, emaciated from the disease. And his head had been covered in a fine fuzz after the failed chemotherapy. The weeks of cryo recovery were filling him out. His hair was thick and dark. She'd been wrong. He didn't look like he'd stepped out of her last memory of him. He looked younger. As if he'd lost some of the years she'd gained. She wished the tubes and electrodes were gone, that she could see his face entirely.

"Some of the others say they dreamed," she told him. "But I've never heard one that can remember very clearly. And so few who still have spouses can tell me if they've altered during their time here. They call us frost widows, you know. There's even a legal process, "disunion". The government had some battles over that one. It became law five years ago and there was a flood of applications. I never— I don't want to. But if it's something you— it's not just my body that's changed, you know. We can talk about it when you've woken. I've done enough arguing with myself over the decades to substitute for you, I'd guess. No need to do it more, not with you lying there waiting to do it yourself.

"Not many frost widows left anymore. Most dissolve their marriages beforehand now. Or go in together. We even make dual cryo tanks now for couples. Ha! Imagine that. And you, rolled in with three strangers like clothes in a washer. As if it mattered. But it was something the marketing team cooked up and it seems to make people happy, so I allowed it. Even thought about climbing in there with you a time or two, just like those couples. Someone had to stay out here and watch over you though. Someone had to wait. Our friends kept urging me to file for disunion, to find someone new. Fall in love again. For years. They kept telling me it's what you'd want for me. And that when you woke— if you woke, you might want— someone else, too. That I was holding us both hostage." She heard her voice break and felt a prickle at the corners of her eyes. The light seemed too bright, too sterile for thoughts like these. They were thoughts for the dark and empty bedroom. Old, habitual thoughts for hibernating in. Not for here. Not for him. Not yet. She blotted her eyes with a tissue, mentally cursing the mascara she'd put on. *As if it'll cover up your age. As if it'll lend you any illusion at all anymore.*

"I couldn't do it," she admitted. "Even your mom— she told me to have you declared dead, back before the disunions. She kept trying to tell me you weren't coming back. But I knew you

would. I *knew* you would. I sat with her in the end. She wasn't alone, dearest, I want you to know that. She told me she'd give you my love when she saw you on the other side. I didn't argue with her. So now I'm giving you *hers*. In case you didn't find her, wherever you went in that sea of ice. I couldn't bear the idea of admitting you were gone and disavowing our marriage just made me angry. So- I didn't. That isn't to say- it *has* been thirty years, Alex. I don't want to be dishonest. One way or another we will have to decide what happens next and I don't want to do it with a lie hanging over us. We agreed, before your freezing, that there should be others. There were. A few. But they weren't you. I thought you should know. I always came back. Every time. Waited by your tank, but the world spun on for me- even if it never did for you." She adjusted the sheet, refolding the edge. Cleared her throat. "There now. That's the worst of it, anyway. I think- I think I'm going to get a glass of water, Alex. If you'll excuse me a moment." She rose and stepped quickly into the hallway, letting out a breath as she closed the door. It had meant a fight when they'd talked about her life without him. Every time. But none as bad as when they'd talked about her dating others.

It was one of those last days before the freeze. Alex had been far too sick to make love for months. She'd tried to reassure him, tried to brush it off. For a while, it worked. She'd watched him dwindle, whittled away by the nausea and the exhaustion. That day, she'd been packing away his things at his insistence. Folding his clothes into plastic containers as he sat on the bed, the late summer sun blazing on the bones of his skull and leaving hollow shadows in the dips and the stubble where his hair was just returning. He'd watched her, too tired and in too much pain to do anything else. He liked having her in the room, he'd said. Their friends had long since drifted away, worn out from the long illness, distracted by their own lives. Having her nearby made him less lonesome.

"Would you like to wear this one?" she asked, holding up an old slouching shirt with an unraveling hem. It was his favorite.

"Does it matter?" he asked. "They'll just take it off after I fall asleep."

She shrugged. "But you'll be comfortable during the appointment."

He smiled. It was ragged and sad. "Always thinking of me. Time to start thinking about you, Lisa."

"I'm fine," she said, holding out the shirt to him. "You don't have to worry about me."

"I know I don't. But I worry anyway." He didn't reach for the shirt. She folded it and set it beside him, thinking he was just too exhausted to lift his arm. "Think of this as practice then, thinking about what makes you happy. What do you want me to wear? On this last date?"

"Don't say that. It's just a trip. For a little while." She folded another shirt too quickly and stuffed it into the box.

He caught her hand. "Okay then. What do you want me to wear until I get back?"

She thought for a moment scanning the clothes that lay spread around them. "Well— there's your blue suit. You always look so handsome in that. But it's not exactly cozy. Maybe—"

"It's the blue suit then."

"What should I wear?" she asked him, going back to folding. He shook his head.

"I'll take a rain check. You wear what you like on the day of the appointment. And then, some night a month from now, when the leaves are just starting to turn and the breeze is just right, promise me you'll wear that yellow dress, the one that shows off your shoulders so well— you know the one." He slid his fingers over the back of her neck, playing with the loose strands of hair that clung to it.

"Okay," she said, smiling and bewildered at the sudden turn.

"Wear that dress and go out with Marie. Let her help you find someone who'll love that dress as much as me."

She drew back, her smile dropping away, already shaking her head.

"I want you to be *happy*," he said, anticipating her protest. "Maybe that means just reconnecting with our friends and nothing else. Maybe it means having some casual fun for a while. Maybe it means falling love again—"

"No," she said, pushing his hand away from her shoulder. "It doesn't mean *that*."

"It might. Don't close yourself off from it because of me."

"It's only five years!" she cried.

"That's a long time. It might be longer—"

"It won't be. We aren't talking about this right now." She knelt and shoved a pair of pants into the tub and rubbed an arm over her eyes.

"Then when should we talk about it? There's no time left."

She didn't answer, only yanking another pair of pants from the pile. He tried again.

"If it were permanent, you wouldn't think this way. If I were going to die instead of—"

"It wouldn't be any different. And you aren't going to die. I'll be right there when you wake up, and everything will be like it was two years ago."

He slid off the bed, sitting clumsily beside her, and catching her hands. "It won't, Lisa. Don't spend your life or— these years— waiting for that. For me. You've already been waiting all this time. I'm the one going in that tank. Don't get frozen with me."

"Stop!" she shouted at him. "This isn't up for discussion. Don't ask me again." She stood up, swiping at her eyes again.

"I *have* to. I love yo—"

She threw the pants in her hand at him. "I *hate* this. I hate talking about this. I hate thinking about this. I hate your cancer. And that awful tank with its choking smoke. I hate being left behind."

She'd run out of the room after that, disappearing for a while until she could be certain she wouldn't say worse to him. He'd been right. Five years had been a long time. Twenty-eight had been even longer. So there'd been others. Even one or two she'd thought about loving. But before she could convince herself, they'd all drifted away. Nobody wanted the complications of a frost widow.

It was better this way, meeting him like this, she thought. Even if he decided he didn't want what she'd become. There was no third party to consult or negotiate with. No children to reconcile. Only him and only her, the way it had been in the beginning. She wiped her eyes and walked down the corridor to her office.

Her assistant looked up with a half smile that quickly disappeared as she entered. "You said to—"

"I know, John. But this is harder than I expected. I just—aren't there any phone calls to answer or memos or—"

"Nothing. You cleared the board two days ago. Everything's been rerouted to Sam. You know that." He got up and pulled a chair over beside the desk, patting the seat. She sank into it and fiddled with her rings.

"He can't be awake yet, so you can't be arguing," he said. She laughed.

"No. Not yet. At least, not out loud."

"Is he— is the recovery going badly?"

"No, nothing like that. Everything is going well. His organs are all in good health, the last of the machines are going to be removed in a few hours. It's going as smoothly as any."

"Are you— *bored*? I think you've got a book in—"

She shook her head. "No. Definitely not bored. Just—scared."

"Was he mean?"

"Never. I'm not scared of *him*. It's just been such a long time. I've altered so much. I look back at who we were and I barely recognize myself."

John squeezed her elbow. "You're allowed to change your mind, you know. No one could blame you. It's different from other marriages. Couples— they grow together, each partner changing with the other. You didn't have that. You stood by him all this time, no one could ask for more than what you've done to keep him safe. If you want to move on—"

"I don't want to move on. All this time and I'd still choose him. But what if he wakes up and sees this wreck that

I've become and doesn't feel the same?"

"What wreck? You're no wreck, Lisa. I didn't know you thirty years ago, so I can't tell you what's changed. But I know the woman who is in front of me now. You're kind and honest and driven. You even manage to crack a joke once in a while." He nudged her and she smiled. "That's attractive. And things like that don't usually change much. Not at the age he entered cryo, anyway. You still have things in common. Things he'll need to anchor himself in the world he wakes up in. You think he hasn't changed, but the world has. His body might be thirty-seven still, but his mind, the things that make him— *him*, are from your era. You loved the same things. Grew up with the same music, the same cultural icons, the same technology. More than that, you've experienced the same history— you've just experienced more of it. It might be nostalgia for you, but it's his lifeline now. All that connects him to people who lived what he did not."

"We can't just live in the past for the rest of our lives," she protested.

"No," agreed John, "But the nice thing about change is that it keeps happening and it doesn't have only one direction or destination. He's going to catch up. Might take some time, but he'll meet you where you are."

"If he even wants to."

"He fell in love with you once already. He'll only get better with practice." He patted her shoulder. "Come on, you don't want him waking up without you, do you? Besides, nothing to do here except listen to me goad you into going back."

She reluctantly left her office, returning to the recovery room where Alex lay. The bed was propped up and she panicked for a moment, thinking she had missed the chance to greet him as he woke. But his eyes were still closed. A tech in crisp blue turned to her with a smile.

"We've just removed the feeding tube," she said. "It shouldn't be long now. There's still the catheter and the sensors, but that'll come after he's conscious."

Lisa nodded absently. She knew the procedure.

"Can I get you anything, Mrs. Sabri?" asked the tech.

"No thank you," she said, sitting beside the bed again. The tech turned to leave and she called after her, "You've done a wonderful job. Taking care of him. Taking care of all of them. Thank you, Sandy."

The woman smiled, startled. They were always shocked when she remembered their names. She'd long ago decided to be amused by that rather than insulted. "You're very welcome," Sandy answered and was gone.

She touched Alex's fingers with her own, to let him know she'd returned. She'd almost forgotten what he looked like, relying on pictures as frozen as he had been. To see him without the tube startled her. The tiny tics and the way his face

slackened in sleep were things she hadn't even realized her mind had lost. *You were once mine, even this part*, she thought, and then looked quickly away toward the hallway, where her mind was safe from the grief that threatened to overwhelm her. "I should tell you about more than just me. Us," she said. "There's a whole planet's worth of changes out there. I'm not certain where to start." She thought for a bit, letting the slow beeps of the machines lull her into a half-hypnosis. "The world— well, I suppose it's the same as any era," she said. "Some will always say things are worse than the era before, and some will always see things as getting better. *I think they're better*, but I'm stuck in the middle of it. You might be the better judge. More like someone far in the future looking backward than like the man I grew up with. The flesh and blood of the context sloughed away because you weren't there to suffocate in it.

"The war ended, at last, about three years after you fell asleep. Then the money dried up, just like after every war. And when that happened, a lot of trouble came with it. Including this place's fate. I got a call late one night from a tech. I don't think he was assigned to you, I'd never met him, nor have I since. He was just reaching out to all the families who had someone in their tanks. The business was on the brink of collapse and we'd had no idea. There should have been safeguards. Insurance. *Something*. There was supposed to be. But the man in charge was crooked. He never had a plan and he'd just up and left with all the funds. They were going to shut off your tanks." She stopped, pressed a hand to his cheek. "I was going to *lose you*." Her voice cracked and she pulled back, folding her hands into her lap. Reminding herself that he might not want her to touch him anymore. Might not want her to care. She still had to tell him, though. He needed to know. She cleared her throat. "The other families and I pooled whatever we'd saved, whatever we could scrape together, and we bought this place. Had to."

She could remember that call clearly. Just before bed. She'd been showering.

"They've been shutting the tanks down on a rotation," the tech had told her. His voice had sounded tired, as if he'd already said it a dozen times to other families and each time had been worse. "A tank spends every third day off. Then two days to get back down to temp. It isn't enough to trigger a thaw yet, but it's close. And management has been talking about increasing the shutoffs to every other day. I couldn't stay quiet anymore."

Lisa could remember the droplets of water plunking onto the bathroom floor from her wet hair, the slimy feel of the wet phone that had dampened in the steam from the still-running shower behind her.

"What can we do?" she'd asked.

"Move him," answered the tech, "if you can find a facility

with an open tank."

"But there's a shortage— war casualties. The government's commandeered most of them for soldiers."

The tech had sighed. "I don't know what to tell you. I don't have a plan. I just— thought you'd want to know. Give you a chance to say goodbye if nothing else, before the electric gets shut off for good and the tanks spoil." The line had gone silent as he hung up on her. Lisa stood in the bathroom for another twenty minutes staring at the sink, her mind leaping to different solutions and rejecting them as impossible.

She'd spent the next three days frantically calling facilities, each one more distant and expensive. Those that weren't full were out of reach and she grew increasingly panicked. She'd fallen asleep at her desk, at last, worn out by the lack of sleep. It was her boss that found her, and though she knew she should have been terrified of losing her job, it paled to insignificance in comparison to losing Alex and she let the story pour out of her. Her boss, Bill, had listened, leaning against the corner of Lisa's desk, ignoring the flutter of loose paper in the breeze from the fan. He'd fumbled with the box of tissues on the corner and thrust one toward her with an awkward pat of her hand instead of yelling. Waited until she'd finished and then asked, "How much is the electric?"

"What?"

"The electric bill, how much is it?"

"I don't know. Thousands, I'd imagine. All those tanks."

He frowned, pushed up his glasses. "It's that place down on Cedar, right? Cryonix or something?"

"Yes, that's the one."

"I'm no expert— I mean, Martha and I, we looked at a tank once, for later, but we never got serious about it. From what I've seen, there can't be more than a dozen in a small place like that. This Daniels guy, he the owner?"

Lisa shrugged, confused. "As far as I know. I mean, it isn't a chain or anything. That's why it's so hard to find anywhere to take Alex."

"Then he can't have that huge of an outlay for electric. He's been there ten years. It would have failed by now, especially with him skimming, if the electric were that high. Get a list of the other families. Maybe that whistleblower will give you one. Or someone else sympathetic. See how many you can find. Much cheaper to chip in and pay the electric bill to buy yourself some time rather than trying to ship Alex somewhere halfway across the country."

"But the electric's just the start. How will we pay the techs? There's not even someone running the place."

"Look, Lisa, start with the small stuff. Start with the electric bill. That may give them enough wiggle room to pull themselves up." He glanced out the office door to make sure no one was lingering nearby. "Never tell anyone this, but there've

been a handful of months where an electric bill might have been enough to sink this place if it had been just a little larger. And if they can't— well, you should be calling the police about Daniels, if no one else has. They'll catch him eventually. You could take the business to court anyway. Or offer to buy it. If they're really going under, they might settle for pennies on the dollar."

"I can't run a cryogenics storage place!" she cried. "I don't know anything about it!"

"You don't need to, not the way they're running it anyway. The doctors told you they'd likely have an answer soon. You just keep it going a few more months, and you won't have to worry anymore, Alex will be awake. You just want to keep him safe, right?"

"Of course."

"Then you've just got to make sure it's maintained. You don't have to attract new customers. So you can get rid of the entire marketing department and budget over there. The techs, what do they do every day? Check the tanks, make sure everything is going well. Are they supposed to be the ones to revive Alex when the time comes?"

"No. He'll have a medical team. At least, that's the theory. Nobody's done it yet."

Bill handed her another tissue, though she wasn't crying. She wondered if it were him that needed it instead. "They'll get it right. A few months and he'll be coming to all the office cookouts, I know it, Lisa."

She nodded, though she wasn't sure she agreed. It seemed to reassure him. He shifted, standing straighter. "So, let's assume that this little facility is going to just store him. And then transport him. No complicated stuff. Let's say there are a dozen tanks in there. Some people are going to get other spots for their loved ones. Probably already have. Let's assume there are eight tanks left full. How many techs does it actually take for that many tanks?"

"I'm not sure. I think I've seen... six? Not so many when I've visited lately."

"I assume they've already cut back on employees. Maybe two per tank? Probably— One for day shift, one for overnights, something like that. You'd need four techs."

"I can't afford four employees!"

"Not by yourself, but maybe with the other families. You already pay a maintenance fee every month. If you owned the place—"

Lisa crumpled the tissues and threw them into the wastebasket. They missed and rolled over the floor. "I would have to pay rent, electric, taxes, insurance— I can barely pay his maintenance fee and keep our house, Bill. How am I supposed to—"

"It's okay, it's okay. I put too much on you. Find out

about the electric bill first. If that works, problem solved, right?"

"For now," she admitted.

"Okay. After that, we'll talk about what's next. Now, go home. Get some sleep. Take tomorrow. Maybe the day after and call the electric company. Find out what's what. When you come back, we'll figure it out."

"But the sales meeting—"

He stabbed a finger toward her computer monitor. "That the file?"

"Yes."

"I'll just print it. Figure it out tonight."

"I haven't finished—"

"I can figure it out. Did all this myself in the beginning. And I've had a lot more sleep than you." Bill pressed his glasses up his nose again.

"You don't have to do this. I know my problems are my responsi—"

"Horsehockey. I've known you for fifteen years. Almost as long as my own kid. Alex too. If something's keeping you up at night, then it's keeping me up at night too. And Martha. And anyone else I complain to. Go home. Rest. We'll keep him safe. Even if we need to buy a tank and install him in your basement."

It hadn't come to that. She'd started small, just as Bill had recommended. Some of the families had managed to move their relatives to other facilities. Two had decided on funerals instead. Two occupants had no remaining relatives, only an estate paying for their maintenance. It had left twenty-four. Twenty were able to help Lisa keep the doors open and the tanks on. Even with Bill's help, they'd barely done it. She'd camped on her kitchen floor for two winters so she could save enough money. Enough heat to keep the pipes from freezing, enough food to keep her waking up and working. She slept in Alex's coat and laughed to herself that she'd freeze to death in order to keep him frozen alive. Eventually, it got better. Daniels was caught, his assets seized and the families gained ownership. The company floated along a while just keeping the tanks on, but it gradually became clear that no one was getting thawed anytime soon. So they elected Lisa to take over and she'd slowly taught herself cryogenics. Partly to figure out what they needed to start successful thaws, and partly so that Cryonix could actually become self-sustaining instead of perpetually on the brink of collapse when someone didn't have enough to chip in. The business eventually recovered under her leadership, Alex was safe, and Bill had peacefully passed away not so long before, refusing his own tank though she'd offered several times.

"It's much bigger than you remember. This place, I mean. We started doing successful thaws about a decade ago. Volunteers

only. Mostly people whose last family member was dying. Not— not because of *money*, Alex. I may have fallen into corporate traps, but never *that* far. People stay in the tanks regardless of their ability to pay, until it's time. Government helps with that now. That was a hard fight." She sighed. "A story for another time. Anyway, we started with volunteers. Their family members wanted us to try, to have one last chance to see their loved ones. Some — never got the chance. And then there were a few who thawed but never regained consciousness. Later, they lasted a few days. Then several months. And now— with the help of many, many other facilities, we've got it finally right. I used to watch all of them. Watch and hold my breath like everyone else. It isn't the biological processes that frighten me. Not anymore. The techs can tell me within half an hour when you'll wake up. They can tell me when you're experiencing distress on the cellular level. And anticipate an organ failure hours in advance and adjust accordingly. We've come a long way. But your mind— it's still a mystery. Sometimes, the outcome is happy, predictable. A mother reuniting with her frozen child. Because no matter how old the mother is, she'll always be that child's mother. A sibling reunification is often bittersweet, this long gap like a crevasse between them. But it is not so different from other siblings. We grow up and away. Lose the day to day as our world expands. But then— there are the others. People who wake to find their family is almost gone. That the people they left behind are not the same as they were. That the world is not what they remember." Lisa picked at a loose thread in her sleeve and watched the soft, undulating lines of the monitor. His brain functions, his breath, his pulse. Measured and laid out for her to see. All but the most precious parts of him.

"The last thaw I watched was over a year ago. A father. He was put in the tank before you were. The son had been eight then. A little boy. He was all that was left. The son had just become a father in his own right. He'd wanted to try to wake his dad, to let him experience being a grandfather. The father's medical treatments were complete, his body was healthy. Just like yours. It should have been happy. Wonderful. Like the end of one of those sappy movies I always liked. We have therapists on staff, of course. Thaws can be overwhelming, even when they go perfectly. They told the son he should go slowly, save the introductions of his wife and new baby for later. So it was just him and the techs in the room. I was with the support staff in the observation room, in case anything happened in the final hours that needed a swift decision. He sat there beside his father, a long time. He didn't talk, just sat, holding his hand. We could see the father surfacing, the monitors tell us when your brain activity changes. It took him a long time. His son finally noticed that his eyes were open and called out to him. I could see them both. The son's face was so joyful. But the father's— he watched the son, totally blank. I thought it was

the drugs wearing off. He listened to his son telling him how happy he was to see him and then I saw it hit him. He yanked his hand away and pushed himself backward on the bed. The son stopped, asked him if he was okay, reached for him again. The father flinched and then pushed away his son's hand. 'Get away from me. You're not my boy,' he said. 'My boy is just eight. Second grade. Cub scout. Have to remind him to put the seat down and take out the trash. Not you. I don't know who you are. Did you do something to him? You do something to my boy?' He shot up, ready to fight and the therapists raced in to calm him. That man still hasn't accepted his son. Or that it's been thirty-five years since he went to sleep. The monitors can't show us that. Can't tell us what you dream of in there. Or how fragmented you'll be when you return. If you'll return at all. Or if you'll just stay in the memory you have of the world as it was while your body exists here. I didn't want to see any more thaws after that. Luckily, they haven't needed me for one since."

She glanced up at the observation room window. It was clear, no one-sided mirrors in her facility. She could see a few techs talking with one another, a therapist scowling into her coffee, no one paying her much mind. Still, she lowered her voice even more. "I'm *frightened* Alex. If a father can't recognize his own child, what chance have I got with you? And your mind— will you be lost in this world? The friends you had are different people. The job you did, it doesn't exist anymore. I know how strong you are, how intelligent. I know you'll find a new place. I know you'll recover. What I don't know is if you'll live the rest of your life regretting what you missed. I do. Every day. I regret what you've missed. What I've missed with you. I keep thinking of you as a time traveler, someone leaping forward. But you aren't. Because in the time travel stories, they always go back. With a new appreciation for their lives, with foreknowledge to arm themselves against their worst mistakes. We're not them. We can't go back and have our happy ending. One way or another, we end here, in this time, in this future. What I don't know is whether or not it will be happy."

She could just barely remember being happy with him. All those memories were threadbare by now. Altered into daydreams. She didn't trust that her mind hadn't altered them in all the years since. All but one. Her favorite memory. It ought to have been their wedding. Or their first kiss. Something momentous. Life changing. But it wasn't those memories she reached for when she needed him most.

Opening a jar of dilly beans. That was what she thought of whenever she hit a low point. Whenever she missed him a little too much to face the day. A few years before he fell ill. A few years after they'd bought the house. An absolutely normal day. A boring day. Her favorite day.

She didn't even remember when they'd canned the beans. Long

enough that rust was gathering on the ring. She could see it in the back of the top shelf, the vinegar a cool green in the sunlight. She knew she should leave them. Or better, dump them into the compost pile. But as soon as she saw them, she could imagine the fizzing bite of the vinegar and her mouth started to water. Alex found her teetering on the back edge of an old kitchen chair, reaching for them.

"What are you doing?" he cried, grabbing the chair and her leg at the same time to steady her.

Lisa ignored his panic, swatting the cobwebs aside.

"There's one more jar," she said.

"One more jar of what? Diamonds?"

She rolled her eyes though he couldn't see, her fingertips catching on the ring of the jar, she tipped it forward and it fell with a thud, rolling slightly through the thick dust rings that other jars had left. "Dilly beans."

"You're risking your neck for pickles?"

"Mmm." She was able to grasp the jar and pulled it back. Alex caught her and helped her step back down. He frowned at the jar between them but didn't release her.

"Ugh, it's rusted Li."

"Just the canning ring. The beans are ok."

He made a grab for it. "You can't eat those Lisa. You'll die."

She laughed and pulled the jar away, twisting loose from his grasp. "I won't die. They're fine. And it's the last jar. At least until next year."

"So?"

"I had a craving." She tried to loosen the lid and found it stuck. She twisted harder with a soft grunt. A few flakes of rust dropped away but that was the only effect.

He watched her, slightly amused as she clamped the jar between her legs and tried again. She looked up at him when it didn't budge. "You could help you know," she said.

"I'm not opening that. I'd become an accessory to my wife's death."

"I'll share," she offered, mostly to hear his laugh. He hated pickles.

He kissed her forehead. "I love you too much to help you," he said.

"You think I can't get them open myself. You think I need you, that I'm helpless without you." She squinted at him, pretending annoyance.

"I know you can get them open. May take you using a hammer, but I know you, Lisa. You'll get it open." He slipped around her, wrapped his arms around her back. He pulled the jar carefully loose from her legs. "What I think," he said into the well of her ear, "is that I need you more than you need me. And that if you died of food poisoning, I'd fall apart without you. A lot faster than you'd fall apart without me." He wiggled the

jar lid.

"That's not true," she muttered. His chin was heavy on her shoulder, his hands shook with the effort of twisting the cap loose. He stopped to take a breath.

"It is. If I were gone, you'd just get one of those jar gripper things and move on."

"I'd be a mess. And I'd get botulism within the month."

His laugh was a warm rumble against her shoulder. He kissed her cheek. "You're tougher than you know, Lisa. You were always going to be wonderful, do wonderful things, with or without me. I'm just tagging along." He slid free, taking the jar with him. "And preventing a stomach ache." He popped the jar lid open and immediately dumped it onto the barn's dirt floor.

She yelled in protest.

"Come on," he laughed, "I'll take you to the deli to make it up to you. Bet they've got a batch or two left from last year."

"You were right, you know," she told his sleeping body. "When you told me I was tougher than I thought. For a few years, I felt guilty about it. About going on. About the few days I managed to fall asleep without any problems. About the days I made it without crying. About the moments I managed to laugh. I know that isn't what you wanted. It slowly faded. And after the fifth anniversary of losing you, I called your doctor. We had a long talk and he made me understand that you weren't going to wake up the next month or year— that I was on my own. Maybe for good. So I made you a promise, although you didn't know it. A trade. That I was going to be happy for both of us. And that you had to wake up. When you woke up, I'd share all the joy I'd stored up while you were gone. That was the deal. And I have been. I've been happy and fulfilled. I have people to care about me and people I care for. I hope I've been useful to the world. That this company has made lives better. And the truth is— if you decide to go a different way, if you find a stranger beside you instead of the woman you knew, I'll get a jar gripper and I'll move on. Go back to being happy. What I'm most worried about is whether you will. The truth is, I'd rather share everything with you. But I won't force you. Remember that you're going to be fine. And I'm going to be fine." She smiled, though her eyes stung again. "Whatever you decide, I want you to put on that blue suit some evening in the spring when the leaves are just budding and the breeze is soft. The suit that makes you look so tall, you know the one. I'll call up Marie and she'll take you dancing. Someone will love that suit as much as me, Alex. I want you to be *happy*."

She picked up the bag of clothing she'd brought for him. That same ragged shirt and old jeans. His favorite. She traced the impression of his wedding band underneath the plastic with one finger and wished she'd worn something yellow. The monitor

chirped and she looked up at it. The brain pattern shifted. He was waking at last. She stared at the monitor, not daring to look over at him. Her lungs felt too tight and her hand pressed down hard against the bag of clothing. His ring made a thick circle impression in her palm. *Old, she thought, silly. You should go. Let one of the techs explain everything. Get up. Walk out the door. Go!*

His breathing shifted, a sudden inhale, as if she'd shaken him, as if she was prodding him to get up and shower for work. She didn't look. Caught her reflection in the window again. So dull and worn. Hair, skin, clothing all pale and thin. Insubstantial. A photograph that had lain too long in the sun. Her hand was wrapped in a sudden warmth. She glanced down at it and found Alex's fingers threaded through her own, squeezing lightly.

"Good morning Li," he said, his voice raspy from the recent removal of the feeding tube. He stared at her, tracing the change in all her features. He let her go and raised his hand to her cheek. She watched him hesitate for an instant before he touched her. His fingers brushed the worry lines at the corner of her eye. Then slid slowly over her hair. She'd stopped dying it almost two decades before. It was too late to worry whether she ought to have dyed it again. She waited, uncertain what he thought, what he wanted. How much he'd understood of her rambling talk.

He caught her fingers again, without saying more. Then raised her hand to his lips and kissed it. "I had a good dream about you. Do you want to hear it?"

She laughed softly. "Yes. I want to hear it."

He pushed himself up to sit, struggling until she helped him. He leaned into her, slid his fingers over the back of her neck. "It was a long one. About a yellow dress."

"The dress is gone, I'm afraid," she admitted.

He smiled, wiped his eyes. "The dress wasn't important. It was the woman inside it that mattered."

"The woman might be gone too."

He shook his head. "No. You were right here when I woke up, just like you promised." He was crying. It frightened her.

"It's okay," she told him, rubbing his back. "Everything's going to be okay."

"It already is," he said. "I woke up healthy. To the sound of your wonderful voice. To your beautiful face. How could it not be okay?" His hand pressed her cheek and his smile faltered. "I'm so *sorry* that I overslept," he whispered. "Forgive me?"

"Years ago," she said.

He kissed her. "I've *missed* you."