

## CHAPTER ONE

Robert's legs buckled, refusing to support him. He gripped the back of an armchair, a muted blue and beige plaid no doubt intended to sooth visitors during their death vigil. His body swayed like a drunken teenager on his first binge. The walls of the room seemed to be tilting.

The plaid design of the chair blurred in and out of focus, heightening his dizziness. Unable to raise his head to escape the wavering lines, Robert closed his eyes.

Just a moment ago, searing pain had racked his body. He'd stiffened every muscle to endure that latest wave of torture. But now as he hovered in the corner of the hospice room, his body was pleasantly numb.

"On my count, one-two-*three*."

A voice seemed to be commanding Robert to do something. Straighten up? Snap out of it? He pried his heavy eyelids open.

Across the room, two staffers in white lab coats gripped the lifeless arms and legs of Robert's body and lowered it into what looked like a white plastic coffin. The feeling of disconnect intensified. Robert raised his right hand in front of his face, turning it to view both sides. It sure seemed like he was standing in the corner.

The petite blonde running the show was Anne. She wasn't part of the hospice staff. She was here strictly for retrieval.

Her assistant was a burly jock with hairy arms and sloping shoulders, the muscle of the operation. While the jock wheeled a big cooler of ice closer to Robert's body in the white coffin, Anne started an IV, then twisted open the port on a bag of fluid suspended on a pole. The fluid was for damage control, Robert had been told. If the blood didn't continue to flow freely through the brain, too much calcium built up, neurons got damaged, free radicals went wild, blah, blah, blah. Robert couldn't remember all he'd been told about the procedure, but basically the fluid was supposed to keep a lot of damage from happening to his body during transport.

He tried to massage his temples with his fingertips, but got no relief from the muddle in his head. He'd just been whispering something to Anne when all the bells and beepers went off.

It was about the smell in the room. The necrotic stench of cancer was everywhere, a permanent odor in his nose that he could almost taste. He'd been wondering why someone on the staff hadn't noticed and at least sprayed some kind of deodorizer or opened a window to freshen the air. Now he couldn't smell anything.

Anne nestled Robert's head into a separate compartment of the plastic coffin, taking extra care to ease the neck into a recess similar to the one used by the shampoo girl at the salon where Robert used to get his hair styled.

Robert glanced at the clock on the bedside table. 8:35AM. Amanda was probably still sleeping, with that goofy chin strap cinched up tight to ward off sagging jowls, and her lotion-slathered hands tucked into her special gloves. She'd refused to come to the hospice. Instead, she'd made one last stab at making him feel like a moron for doing this.

The clacking of ice distracted Robert, and he moved closer to watch Anne shovel the frozen cubes around his head until his face was covered. Then she fitted a white plastic lid in place and clamped it shut. Fear lurched in Robert's belly again.

As Anne worked, the jock fastened an apparatus across the white coffin at chest level. The contraption looked like a motor from an ice cream maker, only instead of locking a paddle into the underside of the motor, the guy popped in a big suction cup. With a rubber-gloved hand, he smeared clear goo onto Robert's lifeless chest, and then started what was called 'the thumper'.

When the suction cup pressed down on the chest, it forced the heart of the dearly departed to circulate thinned blood through dead arteries, and when the suction cup pulled up, it expanded the chest, drawing air into non-functioning lungs. They called it cardio-pulmonary support. CPS, not CPR. There would be no resuscitation today.

Once both staffers completed their tasks, they piled blue ice packs around the torso and limbs. Anne checked her watch. "Let's roll."

Unlocking the wheels, the jock steered the white coffin out of the hospice room. The steady suck and woosh of the thumper reverberated down the short hallway to double doors that slid open automatically. Anne stepped into the back of the ambulance to guide the box, while the jock shoved the human ice chest inside. Robert climbed aboard, and heard the doors bang shut behind him.

Euphoria settled over him, a giddiness that begged for giggles. It was over: the chemo that left him weak and nauseous, the pain that no amount of drugs could eliminate, those phony tears Amanda always managed to conjure up at the clinic, even the alarming clumps of his hair snagged in his comb. Done. Finished.

But not dead. Like Alex Darden had said, "You won't be deceased, Robert. You'll be cryonically preserved."

Geez, he hoped this worked.

## **CHAPTER TWO**

Without sirens or flashing lights, the ambulance turned into a non-descript industrial park at the edge of town, and drove to the back where the Cryonics Center sat unobtrusively between a custom plastics fabricator and a commercial printing shop. Robert had intentionally arranged to spend his final days at the hospice across town so he could be transported quickly to the center.

As he'd lain in a morphine haze waiting for the cancer to finish him off, he'd deluded himself with fantasies that Alex Darden would come to the hospice to sit at his bedside. Even that morning, as Robert felt his life slipping away, he'd kept an eye on the door, willing Alex to appear.

Now that the pain and delirium had faded, Robert understood his obsession with seeing Alex one last time. He'd wanted the reassurance that he was doing the right thing. In hindsight, he was damn lucky their paths had crossed a year ago.

They were both flying to Atlanta. Robert was heading home. Alex was on his way to a lecture at Georgia Tech. No sooner had Alex buckled his seat belt, than he had his laptop out, clicking away at the keyboard, his knee bouncing, his head nodding as though he were deep in conversation.

He seemed totally oblivious to passengers shuffling by on their way to coach, and to Robert, who sat sipping the scotch he'd requested the moment he stepped on board.

Out of the corner of his eye, Robert glimpsed pictures of dissected animals and what looked like frozen organs on Alex's laptop. When a picture of a naked man on a stainless steel gurney popped onto the screen, Robert choked on his cocktail.

With feigned surprise, Alex raised his head and flashed a smile at Robert. He reminded Robert of Freddie Mercury from Queen with his dark, bushy mustache and toothy grin.

"Didn't mean to shock you," Alex had said. "I guess I've become immune to all this."

"What are you?" Robert asked. "A coroner?"

"No. Actually, I'm a cryoengineer. I'm on my way to Georgia Tech to discuss molecular nanotechnology."

All it took was Robert's clueless expression to keep Alex going. "With nanotechnology, we'll be able to build and repair anything, cure cancer, reverse aging, even teach the body to re-grow a limb."

By this time, Alex was projecting to anyone in first class interested in listening. "But the most exciting application is revival of a preserved human. We'll be able to bring back the dead."

The old man across the aisle was the first to jump into the conversation. "Like Ted Williams."

"Exactly!" Alex beamed as he scanned the seats nearby to see who else was eavesdropping. Then he leaned out into the aisle, toward the old man. "You might be surprised at the number of scientists and VIP's who have already signed up to be cryonically preserved."

"I don't get it, though," the old man said. "Won't Ted Williams be too old to play baseball when he comes back?"

"No!" Alex's voice carried all the way up to the flight attendant who was preparing to give her preflight demonstration. Her head snapped up to see if she had a disturbance on her hands. But most of the passengers in first class were engrossed in Alex's impromptu presentation.

"If we can rebuild tissue and repair failing organs," Alex said, "Mr. Williams can potentially have a whole new career sometime in the future."

At that point, Robert had turned to the window to watch as the airplane taxied to the runways. He'd heard rumors of Einstein's brain in a freezer somewhere. Walt Disney, too. It all sounded like a get-rich-quick scheme designed to separate suckers from their retirement funds.

But the gentleman across the aisle was really pumping Alex for information. No doubt, the old man felt the hands of time around his neck and was willing to consider any option. It sounded like a good idea for a science fiction movie.

"How long before you can bring these people back?" the old man asked.

"The simple truth is, we don't know." Alex let his statement hang in the air for just a second. "We do know that we have to be able to work on the atomic or molecular level, and currently we don't have that technology. Like Ralph Merkle says, with our present technology, we're basically trying to build Lego castles wearing boxing gloves. But someday we'll be able to reassemble cells and tissues one molecule at a time."

An announcement from the captain instructed the flight attendants to take their seats, and the airplane streaked down the runway. But the moment the plane leveled off, Alex reeled his audience back in. He leaned into the aisle to address everyone.

“Remember back in the sixties when they first built computers that took up a whole room? If you’d asked one of those guys, ‘How soon will I be able to carry a computer around in my pocket?’, he would have looked at you like you were crazy! Then he would have said the same thing as me. ‘I don’t know’.”

Alex slipped his Smartphone out and held it up. “They knew it was a matter of making the components smaller, but back then, they didn’t know how.”

By now, the flight attendant had propped an elbow on the seat in front of Alex. Robert swirled the ice in his empty glass, but she didn’t take the hint.

She asked Alex, “How does making things smaller bring back the dead?”

“First of all,” Alex pressed his palms together, “let’s stop using the term dead. Our patients aren’t dead, they’re cryonically preserved.”

A woman who had tilted her seat back to get a peek at Alex nodded along with the others.

“Okay.” Alex drummed his fingers against each other. “Let’s talk about sperm.”

He chuckled when the attendant’s mouth dropped open. “They’re like little robots programmed with incredible amounts of information,” he said. “They have the DNA to build a human being, or at least half of one. They know where they need to go, and they’re competitive enough to want to be first. Once they reach their target, they know how to break through a barrier and release this DNA. All we’re trying to do is create our own nano-robots that will take the DNA of who you were, and build you again.”

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Robert’s ice coffin was pulled from the back of the ambulance. He stepped out behind the burly jock and followed as his remains were rolled through a back entrance of the Cryonics Center. The jock pushed the cart straight ahead into a state-of-the-art surgical room with a stainless steel table and bright overhead lights.

Pausing for just a second, Robert glanced down the short hallway to the lobby at the front of the center. Seated in the reception area was an elderly woman who must have been close to 100 years old. Her face was a mass of wrinkles, and her body appeared to have shrunk in on itself. Next to her, a gray-haired man waited patiently. He must have been making arrangements to have his mother preserved. And not a moment too soon.

The old woman raised her palm slightly, her mouth set in a serene smile. Robert waved at her, then shook his head at the gaff before he hustled into the surgical suite just as the doors fluttered shut.

Standing off to the side, he watched as staffers, dressed in surgical gowns and masks, scurried about adjusting dials on machines and checking monitors. It was like he’d just been wheeled into an emergency room and only had seconds to live.

Two surgeons charged backwards into the room, their gloved hands elevated to remain germ free. A technician aimed a glaring light on Robert’s naked body, while a nurse swabbed his chest with disinfectant. Another technician stuck temperature monitors under Robert’s arms, between his legs, on the back of his neck. The quicker they got his body temperature lowered, the better. Right now, Robert’s body was like a raw steak on the counter, going bad.

Just like open-heart surgery, one of the surgeon made an incision along the sternum, used a saw to cut through the bone, and cracked open Robert’s chest. A tube was inserted into Robert’s aorta, another into the vena cava leading from the top right atrium. The intention was to pump a solution of balanced sugars and salts to flush out the body and cool it. Alex Darden had called this the blood washout.

Moving in closer, Robert watched a steady red stream flow through a clear tube down the side of the table and into a drain in the floor. A nurse stepped to the side to pick-up an instrument and Robert tried to jump out of her way. Her hand passed right through his stomach. He gasped, as though it might hurt, but he felt nothing. And obviously, she didn't feel anything either because she didn't suddenly call out or drop the clamp in her hand. She had no idea Robert was standing there.

He thought again about the old woman in the lobby. It sure seemed like she'd been waving at him. But that was impossible. No one else could see him. He was just in limbo here, killing time until they put him in the deep freeze. So, what was that wave all about?

He sidestepped over to the door and peeked out through a small window, but the woman was gone. Shaking his head, he returned to the action on the table, assuring himself that she had raised her palm, that's all. Maybe her son had said something to her and that was her reply.

The staff bustled about tidying up, throwing away bloody gauze pads, collecting used instruments while they waited for the last of his blood to drain away. Robert's attempt to wring his hands was futile.

"Please don't let this be a sick joke," he mumbled.

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At first, he'd done what any intelligent man would do when the doctor folded his hands on his desk and quietly said, 'You have cancer.' Robert got a second opinion.

That noted oncologist laid it out in a way Robert could not deny. Like an advertising campaign, the doctor presented images from an MRI and pointed out the large mass in Robert's liver. Then he produced colorful brochures on the finest cancer treatment centers, pamphlets touting the latest pharmaceuticals, and of course, the bar graphs and pie charts that estimated how long Robert had to live.

For the first time in almost thirty years, Robert took the rest of the day off. He struggled to get through the telephone conversation with his secretary canceling appointments, rearranging meetings. By the time he ended the call, Robert felt so weak he'd braced his arm on the roof of his car and rested his forehead on the sleeve of his hand-tailored suit. Struggling for breath, he was unable to even stop the drool that oozed out of his gaping mouth and dribbled down the window of his Mercedes.

Stale exhaust fumes in the parking garage choked Robert, the low clearance closed in on him. He was practically running when he came out onto the open top level. The heat of the day washed over Robert, and his body sagged. He lurched to the edge of the roof, and looked out over Atlanta, the classic query drumming in his head. 'Why me?'

When Amanda heard he was dying, she rushed home from her shopping trip in New York. Robert was in his office, on the phone, when she burst in, her cheeks flushed, her eyes aglow. If he had to describe her expression in one word, it would have been *exuberant*.

Almost overnight, she transformed into a loving, sacrificing wife who put everything on hold for him. She drove him to his chemo appointments. She waited patiently outside the bathroom while he puked his guts out, then helped him back to bed, tucking brand-new sheets under his chin. Death sheets, he'd called them. He was certain she'd agonized over just the right shade and design to go with cancer.

She volunteered for the American Cancer Society, masquerading as a pillar of strength in front of other spouses of dying partners. She even participated in one of those walks – Amanda, who probably hadn't worn a pair of sneakers since she was ten. And she never went anywhere without that goofy pink ribbon pinned to her clothing.

Robert was sure the only reason she got so involved with the cancer organization was to get first-hand information on how soon he could be expected to croak. She couldn't wait to get her hands on his millions.

Wouldn't she be surprised?

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"Running clear," someone said through his surgical mask.

The blood washout was complete. Now came the tricky part. The surgical team would pump a preservative through Robert's heart and into his body, so that every organ, every blood vessel, and most importantly, his brain would be protected.

Water was the enemy. Alex had compared freezing liquid in blood vessels to the hoses in old style automobile radiators. Before anti-freeze, water was used in radiators to cool engines. But water molecules are pushy little buggers. As the temperature drops, water molecules like to congregate, squeezing other molecules aside. And as water turns to ice, it expands. In a car, this expansion cracked radiators, and ripped rubber hoses apart. In the body, freezing water created the same kind of havoc in blood vessels and in the tissue of the brain.

Alex scoffed at a critic of cryonics who used the analogy of frozen strawberries that turned to mush when thawed.

"That is certainly true, because of all the water in the fruit," Alex had told Robert. "But we are replacing most of the water with our cryoprotectant. Your brain will not be mush when it is reanimated."

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"Don't be nervous, Robert. It's going very well."

Jumping back from the surgical table, Robert glanced quickly around the room. "What?"

The old lady he'd seen in the lobby stood a few feet away. She raised her palm again for a wave. She looked even older up close. Her face was a mass of wrinkles, as though someone had wadded up her skin and then tried unsuccessfully to smooth it back over her skull. A slight woman, she stood maybe five feet, with bird bones that poked out at her elbows and shoulders. She reminded Robert of that little old lady who stepped up to the counter and asked, "Where's the beef?"

"Your procedure," she said. "Everything's happening just like it should."

His thoughts whirled. "You can see me?"

"Yes," she nodded.

The gray-haired gentlemen from the lobby slipped up beside the woman. He nodded, too. The wear and tear of age showed in his sagging jowls. Liver spots dotted his face and arms.

"How do you know my name?" Robert asked.

Stepping forward, the man extended a hand, like he wanted to shake.

"Sam Parker. This is Maggie Nelson. We're here to help you with your transition."

Stunned, Robert mumbled, "My transition?"

"From the living to the dead," Maggie said.

"But I'm not dead!" Robert protested. "I'm being cryonically-preserved—"

Sam and Maggie both chuckled.

"That's right," Maggie assured him. "And a hundred years from now, you'll be right back out there, good as new."

The harsh scream of a drill drew their attention to the surgical team.

"Ah," Sam said. "They're starting the vitrification process. That's where they slowly replace the water in your body with the cryoprotectant, the anti-freeze."

“So I’ve been told,” Robert said.

“Since you picked the whole body preservation, it’ll take close to three days for the fluid to get all the way to the tiniest capillaries.”

“Didn’t you do whole body?” Robert asked.

“Nah. All they really need is the brain since that’s the only organ that truly makes us who we are,” Sam said. “All the other organs, tissue, bones and blood will be recreated from the DNA they get from my brain.”

“I don’t know,” Robert said, “The brain-only option gave me the creeps. What if someone in the future decides it’ll be easier to just pop my brain into an existing body? What if people become body donors? Or somebody bumps off cousin Louie and sells his body on the black market to make a quick buck?”

“That will never happen,” Sam said, with a cocky bobble of the head. “Most likely, your brain will be transplanted into a clone grown from your DNA.”

“Alex didn’t tell me that,” Robert said.

“They didn’t tell me that either,” Maggie said. “I think the cryonics people stay intentionally vague, because no one really knows how we’ll be revived. But Sam follows all that technological stuff. He keeps us informed.”

The surgeon finished drilling holes in Robert’s head.

“Geez,” Robert muttered. “They sure tear your body up. I don’t think they’re going to sew my chest shut. Now I’ve got holes in my skull.”

He wondered if he’d be able to part his hair after he was revived and show someone the scars.

“The holes are necessary to monitor the brain for fractures,” Sam said. “As your body temperature drops, hopefully your brain will shrink slightly. They definitely don’t want swelling.”

Maggie stood next to Robert as two techs lifted his body and lowered it into a special freezing chamber made of clear plastic. It was designed with two ports on one side where a tech could reach in to make adjustments.

“By the time they’re finished,” she said, “Your body temperature will be at minus 190 degrees Celsius: the temperature of liquid nitrogen.”

“And then I guess that’s it,” Robert said. “They’ll stick me in one of those tanks and I’ll wake up some time in the future.”

The wrinkles on Maggie’s face got even deeper as she squinched her cheeks. “Well, that’s not necessarily the case.”