

# DEATH FLASH

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“**Y**ou understand how the process works?”

Nora jerked her head in acknowledgment at the doctor towering over her. The fluorescent lights behind him made her squint, giving him an otherworldly halo.

She lay in the pod, shivering. Whether from the cold now or the cold that would soon engulf her, she wasn't sure. Countless technicians milled beyond him. She sensed them beyond the lip of her pod.

“She understands the process.” Peter came into view, taking her glacial hand in his, careful of the tentacles of tubes attached to her arm. His hands were warm, his eyes watery. Tears leaked over her own face, but she couldn't say a word because of the tube down her throat.

They had been at each other's sides for so long. They had already said goodbye, but of course, Peter said it wasn't goodbye, not really.

“The first injection is a strong painkiller. You're not going to feel a thing. Next, we will put you to sleep, the first of your sleeps.” The doctor's lips thinned, in what might have been a smile. “You

will be unaware of the freezing process, and we will monitor you the entire time. The respiratory tube will be removed after the freezing is established. You won't need it anymore. For you, you will slowly fade to sleep. When you wake up ..."

"I will have found a cure for you, my love."

Nora squeezed Peter's hand. Her body convulsed with cold, with fear, but they had already discussed her options. This was her only chance.

"We will begin." The doctor lifted his hand. On cue, Nora's pod was swarmed with technicians. She didn't look away from Peter's eyes, even as the world became fuzzy at the edges. As Peter smudged out of existence.

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Nora was so cold. Ice flowed through her veins, sharper than glass. She thrashed against the pain. This couldn't be right; she wasn't supposed to feel anything. That was the whole point of the sleep. Peter would find a way to heal her body riddled with tumours, and she would wake up free from the pain and disability she had suffered these last months.

She was underwater. She knew she was supposed to lie still, let the technicians do their work, but she couldn't breathe. Survival instinct overwhelmed all senses and she fought. Thrusting her arms out of the freezing liquid that gripped them, she grabbed the edges of her pod and forced her way up and out. The ragged gasp of her breath filled the silence.

The room, just moments before rife with people, was empty. Nora pushed her sopping hair out of her face and let out a sob of terror. Her breathing tube was gone.

The only sound was a beeping, the rhythm speeding up as she whirled around. The beeping came from her, her pulse increasing. Her heart was going to explode if nothing was done.

“Hello?” Her voice was a choked gasp. Nobody responded; she was alone.

The beeping was driving her insane. Nora ripped the monitor off her chest, and the sudden stillness was calming. It felt so good, she continued ripping away the suction cups and tubes.

The intravenous needles hurt as they came out, but Nora didn’t care. She had to get out. Hissing with each release, she stared at the blood trickling down her arms.

She stood on shaky legs. The first thing she realized was she didn’t feel the pain that had been crippling her for months. Over the last weeks, she’d been unable to walk, wasted with pain and weakness. But now she straightened to her full height.

She drew her hands down her emaciated torso. Her same body, whip-thin after cancerous ruin. But now, Nora felt strong. Had the treatment worked? Had a cure been found?

“Peter?” She stepped over the lip of the pod, striding across the room. Despite her panic and confusion, a laugh bubbled to the surface.

She was entirely naked. Before that would have bothered her, when she was crippled and twisted, an old lady far earlier than her years should have allowed. It didn’t matter now. But how long ago was *before*? It felt like seconds. The thought brought her to a sudden halt, shuddering. It could be thousands of years in the future. Was she being observed?

The room was stark, lit in blue lights with that otherworldly glow. A line of cabinets stood along the wall and Nora rummaged through them. She found basic medical equipment, nothing drastically futuristic. Finally, she came across stacks of clean scrubs and hastened to put some on. They fell loose over her skeletal frame, but she now felt equipped to deal with what was on the other side of the door leading out of this preservation chamber.

Afraid she was locked in, she twisted the doorknob with all her force, but it turned easily under her grip.

She entered another hospital room, so different from the one she had just exited. There was a sense of acute wrongness, as though the world had just tilted sideways. It was warm and sun-filled; the bed was draped with a quilt. And it was occupied.

"Sorry," Nora stammered. The woman in the bed didn't notice her. She stared into the face of the baby snuggled in her arms.

Nora turned to sneak back out of the room when the woman spoke. "Hello, you." Her voice was filled with love, with amazement. "Nora."

Nora stilled and wheeled back to the woman. "Mom?" she said in a strangled whisper. It was her, her hair glossy brown before the grey crept in. Her face was flushed and swollen.

Nora's mind tried to bend around the facts. Her mom had passed three years ago, after a decade of devastating dementia. Even before her heart failed, it had been long years since she'd looked at her daughter with a spark of recognition.

But she still wasn't looking at her. Nora knelt at the side of the bed. "Mom! Mom!" Nora was shouting but like always, there was no hint of recognition. Tears streamed down her face. "Mom?"

"Nora," her mom said in adulation. Her face was glowing.

"I don't understand." Nora's shoulders shook and she reached out to shake her mother's arm, to get her to look at her.

Her hand pushed right through. Nora fell back with a horrified gasp.

"Is this a dream?" She looked around the room with a new perspective. Had the cryogenic treatment worked, and now she was dreaming in her frozen sleep? She had never heard of cryo patients dreaming. The thought was unnerving. Would she sleep for hundreds of years, dreaming the entire time? It was a long time to be trapped in your own head.

At the window, the sunshine warmed her face. The room was filled with powdery-fresh baby scent and the underlying primeval smell of blood that always precedes life. If this was a dream, it was the most lucid she'd ever experienced.

“Nora, you are so loved.”

Nora blinked back tears. “I know.” She wished she could have a real conversation with her again. She came to peek over her mom’s shoulder. The baby, hours old, blinking bleary eyes. Herself. Nora had no memory of this moment, but something ancient stirred in her chest. It spoke of having found a safe harbour.

“I will always be here for you,” her mom continued. “We will never be apart.”

Her mother broke off her cooing on a choke, gripped with horror. She stared at the opposite side of the room. Nora couldn’t see anything, but she had the impression someone else was in the room. *Something*.

The shadows made by the bright sunlight flickered and shifted, peeling away from the wall. Tarlike ooze melded together in sticky bunches, stretching like taffy. The shadow grew until it formed a long, slim figure, arms extending up and over the ceiling, reaching toward mother and child.

“No.” Nora threw herself in front of them. Her mother didn’t notice, eyes wide on the shadow figure. Baby Nora started bawling, thin reedy wails.

The sunlight grew brighter, making the shadow starker in contrast. It was blinding, and Nora shut her eyes.

When she opened them, she was no longer in a hospital room. Still in sunlight, she was outside in her childhood backyard. She sat on a hill. Grass prickled through her scrubs and a spattering of cool drops fell on her overheated skin. Nora glanced up. The sprinkler was on, creating summertime rain. Nora stood and moved to the back porch, where her mother stood.

She wore glasses now, the ones Nora would always remember her wearing though logically she knew the frames would have changed throughout her life. She watched her mother fondly as she opened the crinkly package of a popsicle.

“Nora,” she called. “I found grape, your favourite.”

“Thanks, Mom.” Nora’s younger self bounced out of the

house, in a neon pink bathing suit with a candy print. Nora nearly cried out. She loved that bathing suit. She was eight, with her long hair tied back in braids. She remembered this day, and as the child reached out for the offered treat, Nora both watched and was the child once more. Her body felt light, joyful, and her thoughts were bright as the sunshine. She pulled a stray strand of hair away from her mouth. Her skin was tacky with sweat from a day outside in the sun. The sweetness of the ice mingled with the salt on her lips and nothing had ever tasted better before or since.

As she gazed at her mother, she felt nothing but love. "I love you, my darling," her mom said, as if in reply.

Movement in the yard caught her gaze. There, within a copse of trees, darker shadows emerged. Nora dropped the popsicle and stumbled back. The stretched-out shadow man intruded on her memory and she turned to run.

Only she wasn't in her backyard anymore. She ran along a beach boardwalk at sunset, slowing as she recognized where she was. Her first date with Peter. The shadow man hadn't come with her.

Bracing her hands against her knees, she groaned. "Am I dead?" she asked out loud. "Am I reliving my life?"

A man approached, eyes serious behind his glasses. She knew what he was going to say. "I didn't know what was your favourite, so I got them all." He held out an enormous ice cream cone for her.

The feeling of certainty flooded back, that she had found her person. She knew what she was supposed to say: *Caramel is my favourite, but I'll take them all*. Instead, she let out a gasp and threw herself into his arms. "Peter, I don't think it worked."

Peter wasn't shaken by her erratic behaviour. He wrapped her in his arms, ice cream forgotten. "I've always loved you."

And he kissed her and once again she fell headlong into the whirlwind of love. When the world finished spinning, she caught sight of a figure over Peter's shoulder.

The thin shadow-man, stretched impossibly long. He was far down the boardwalk, approaching in jerky spurts. Though she never saw him move, every time she blinked, he was closer.

“I can’t let him catch me.” As she spoke the words, she realized their truth.

She ripped herself out of Peter’s grasp and sprinted down the boardwalk. One of the planks collapsed under her weight and Nora went tumbling into chaos. Every part of her body was on fire, pinned in place by metal. Her skin burned, the pain so great she couldn’t hold on to consciousness. She had been here before. After the car accident. Right before it happened, when she had seen what was waiting for her.

She howled and tried to hold on to consciousness, even as she knew what was coming, where she was going.

And then she was in a void. The only sound was her ragged pants, the darkness absolute.

Tears of horror streamed down her face. She always knew she would end up here. She had been legally dead at the site of the accident when the paramedics arrived, but they restarted her heart. She had never forgotten this place of emptiness where she had gone for that time. The nothingness of death. It was cold here. Oblivion would be better than this. But to be so utterly alone, forever, it was unbearable.

Something flickered in that eternal darkness, a black darker than nothingness. The shadow man had found her, even here. Her heart must continue to beat because it squeezed painfully. There was nowhere to escape him. Where could she go from here? His sticky fingers reached out.

She flung herself backwards and landed in a chair. She let out a long breath, exhausted by the fear, by the running. She was in another hospital room.

A figure lay still in the bed next to her. Her grandfather, surrounded by machines. The beeping was all too familiar and made her skin crawl.

In her hands was a book of poetry. She'd been reading to her grandfather, but he'd asked her to stop. "I don't need to hear all that doom and gloom crap, I've had enough of that for a lifetime." His eyes twinkled. "Next time, bring me one of those romances you like."

"Okay, Pops." She never would. Her Pops died two days after this moment.

"What is it, sweetheart?"

"I don't want you to go." She curled onto the hospital chair, wiping snotty tears with a sodden tissue. She knew what she was going to say, knew how unfair it was, but couldn't stop herself. As she sat with her beloved grandfather, all she could think of was that cold dark place. Her words have haunted her since she spoke them the first time. "I don't think it's a good place we go to."

It was so unfair, but she thought if he knew, maybe he would fight this end. She grabbed his hand, clinging to the fragile bones. So different from the strong man he had been in her childhood. "Stay here, with me."

He stilled. "Ah, sweetheart." He squeezed her hand back, a faint pressure. "This is my time. I know it, deep in my bones. I survived two wars, you know? And never before did I think, this is the end. But now I am here. And my bones are tired, you understand?"

Now she did. She knew what it was to live a half-life in a failing body.

"There are worse things than death. If you trust in nothing else, trust in that. I will go to be with my Miriam, wherever she may be. And to see my Mam again." His dim eyes still held a sparkle, a far cry from their former light. "That would be a good thing."

"I miss you," Nora whispered. Her fingers slipped away as the room was overwhelmed with shadow. Her Pops saw it too, his eyes filled with awe. As the shadow consumed them both, Nora closed her eyes. She didn't have the strength to run anymore.

The call of a gull echoed, lonesome. A stiff salty wind dried her tears. She opened her eyes and found herself on a bench at the edge of a cliff, looking out over the ocean. The sun was setting, creating spectacular colours in the clouds. It was peaceful.

A path wound away, down the ridge of the cliff to the beach. At the bottom of the trail, a smudge of shadow appeared, distorting the world around it.

Nora tensed. She glanced to the other side of the path, which continued on to somewhere else. She could keep on running, but as a wise man had said, her bones were tired.

She concentrated on the sunset for as long as she could, but nothing could extinguish the shadow that grew as it approached, stretching to an obscene height. Nora stilled her trembling limbs, and waited.

As it reached her, the shadow condensed, pulling together to become the silhouette of a man. As the light from the sunset hit the shadow, colour bloomed on its form, until it solidified into her Pops.

She leapt to her feet with a cry. He waited, quiet, with a sad smile, as she stumbled to a stop. It looked like her Pops, but for his eyes, which were full of stormy shadows.

“You’re not him.”

He shook his head. He bore two steaming mugs. “Alas, I am not, though it is not a sufferance to bear his face. He was a good man.”

He sat next to her on the bench with her Pops’ same sigh and extended a mug to Nora. “I made you some tea, the way you like it.”

Tentative, Nora took the mug, ensuring their fingers didn’t touch. She breathed in the fragrant steam. “You always did make a good cuppa.”

“That he did.”

“Who are you?”

“I’ve gone by many names, but I think you already know.”

She nodded to the ocean. "Where are we?"

"One of my favourite places. I've been everywhere, but this is the prettiest sunset I've ever seen."

Nora watched the pretty sunset. "Am I dying?"

"Everyone is dying. It's part of the deal." He paused. "You can't keep on running from me."

"Is this my life flashing before my eyes?"

He shifted and stroked his whiskers. "You might want to think of it more like your death flashing before your eyes."

Nora waited for the horror to kick in but found it had run out. She met the storm in his eyes. "I'm scared."

"Because of what you saw?" She knew he meant the void.

"That was death, wasn't it? I already escaped you once."

"You were very close then, but it wasn't your time."

"I don't want to be alone."

"Ah, Nora." He sounded so like her Pops that when he stretched out his hand, she took it. It was warm and real under her touch. "You were never alone. You just didn't look far enough."

The sun set entirely, and they were left in the blackness. Nora whimpered, but she held the hand and he anchored her.

Overhead, pinpricks of light began to glow, more and more until they filled the dark. Nora felt as though the galaxy extended before her. In the distance, thin streams of light emerged, a new sun rising over a new horizon.

"What is that?"

"It is what's next."

"What's it like?"

"I can't tell you." But Nora felt a longing to know, stronger than anything. When she tried to step forward, she found she couldn't move.

"Are you not here to take me?" she asked. She could just make out his silhouette in the glow.

"I can't. You are stuck."

"You mean the sleep."

He nodded. "You could be suspended for thousands of years, never able to move on. In your frozen tomb, you will be cold and alone, maybe forever. Is that what you want?"

She swallowed over a lump in her throat. "I want to be with Peter, for the end. But it's too late."

"It's not too late." He reached out and touched the point between her brows.

The peace and the dark melted away. Agony overwhelmed her, and she came to, thrashing and choking for air. Surrounded by techs in hospital scrubs, blue flashing lights beeped everywhere. She couldn't breathe, and she reached for the tube down her throat, fighting the arms that tried to hold her in place.

"Her body is rejecting the treatment." She heard the pronouncement. Then a needle slid into her neck, and the darkness mercifully overwhelmed her.

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When she came to, she was in a hospital bed, covered with blankets. The pain that had been her companion these past months were back, eating away at her body. This was the real her.

Peter dozed in a chair next to her, his head crooked at an uncomfortable angle. It was an effort, but she reached out to stroke his arm.

He woke with a start. "There you are." He leaned forward, wrapping his hands around hers. "I thought we'd lost you."

"What happened?"

"Your body responded negatively to the anesthetic. Don't you remember?"

"So I didn't freeze?"

"No, it was instantaneous." He frowned. "But it doesn't mean this is over. We'll keep on fighting. I'll advocate for your right to try again."

"No." Her voice was quiet but final. "That's not what I want."

He stared, a funny smile playing over his lips. “What is it you want?”

“How about we share a cup of tea together?”