

Chapter 22

In spite of knowing he wouldn't learn any results that morning, Cy entered the examination room with lead butterflies in his empty stomach. The unsmiling female technician led him to a gantry waiting at the mouth of the giant scanner.

"Climb here," she said in clipped English, sounding more like a drill sergeant, and demonstrated with slaps of her hands upon the white sheet.

He hoisted himself up and lay down, feeling exposed in his thin, recycled-paper pajamas. Or whatever they were. Certainly no protection against the air-conditioning.

She eyed him head to toe, clucked her tongue, positioned and repositioned his body with latex-gloved hands, and nodded. "*Ja*. That will do. Don't move."

No, Ma'am.

"I will go back there." She pointed.

He didn't turn his head to see where, or even flick his eyeballs, lest such movement incur her wrath.

"And take pictures. Hold your breath when I tell you."

Yes, Ma'am.

"Tell me if anything hurts."

Her face disappeared and a door clunked shut, leaving him alone in the sterile room. The behemoth began to hum like a jet engine warming up, ready to suck him head first into its jaws. Not to worry, he'd experience that before.

What frightened him was the possibility his elevated blood pressure—scanxiety, Anne called it—would precipitate the very crisis they prayed to avoid. Terminate his existence forever.

A coward dies a hundred deaths, a brave man...shut up, Shakespeare.

His bed inched into the cavern and stopped. Moved again, stopped again.

“Hold your breath.”

Cy waited for the technician’s reaction. Silence. How long did he have to hold before breathing again? Surely, she’d had enough time to scribble a few notes. Was it that bad?

“You may breathe.”

Cy gulped in air then gasped, “What’d you see?”

“Your radiologist will go over the results.”

Of course. Technicians worldwide weren’t authorized to reveal anything. He knew that. But surely, if she’d seen *nothing*, she would have said *something*. After all, she was supposed to be zeroing in on the precise spot the American x-rays showed the aneurysm.

“Hold your breath.”

He obeyed outwardly, but inwardly knew the game was up, no point in holding his breath any longer. So much for miracles and answered prayers. So much for God and *ayahuasca* spirits. The lead butterflies landed at the bottom of his gut with a thud.

How could he break the news to Anne? She seemed so happy in her hopes, so bubbling over with love for him and everyone. Disillusioning her beliefs a second time would crush her. Cy could take this loss of fleeting hopes. He’d lived without religious palliatives all his life. But Anne? Unbidden tears welled up and stung his eyes.

The behemoth stuck out its tongue, moving him back into the drafty room. The technician’s door clicked open. “We’re done.”

“Yep, we are.” He blotted his tears with the sleeve of his pajamas and forced himself up, to don his slippers and vacate the gantry for the next victim.

The technician scribbled notes and barely glanced his way as he departed. “The doctor will give you the full report. Good luck.”

He murmured thanks and shuffled into the hall, automaton-like. Opened his locker. Donned his street cloths. At a complete loss what to tell Anne.

Nothing, he finally decided, as he pushed through the heavy door into the waiting room. Reveal absolutely nothing just like the technician.

Anne leapt up from the sofa, eyes alight. “It’s gone, right?”

Cy shook his head. “We won’t know anything until tomorrow, when I see Dr. Gupta.”

“Why so glum then?”

“Tired I guess.” He shrugged and offered his arm.

She took it and didn’t ask more, the warmth of her touch far more comfort than any words could have been, especially religious ones. Grateful, he piloted her outdoors and hailed a cab. Once inside and on their way, he clasped her hand by his side, leaned back, and closed his eyes seeking oblivion. Twenty-four hours before the bad news was spelled out. How would he ever get through them?

“Cyrus?”

“Mm?” He opened his eyes but didn’t release her hand.

“What aren’t you telling me?”

He smiled into her irises, whole universes he wished he had eons to explore. “I love you more than words can say.”

Anne leaned close, subtle perfume louder than her whisper. “I know, sweetie, and I’ll never grow tired of hearing it, but…”

“But nothing.” He inhaled her sweetness and sighed, reclosing his eyes to end the matter.

“There’s nothing more to tell, not until tomorrow.”