

I was gripping Tim's hand so tightly I was probably crushing bone against cartilage, but my gaze was fixed on the oncologist, whose eyes revealed far more than I think he knew. Behind the rimless glasses, I saw the glimmer of a truth he was not prepared to share with us on that first black day. The chances of success were small. My ability to read faces, to pick up on tiny nuances others failed to see, had always been an asset in my work. On that day, it felt more like a curse.

‘I see from your file that you and your wife don't have children, Mr Brandon.’

Tim shook his head, and I felt the tremors racking his body begin to spread to mine. I was shaking in both body and voice as I answered for him.

‘We've only been married for two years. We were planning on waiting a little longer before starting a family.’ I looked at the doctor, whose face was beginning to swim behind my tears.

‘I know this is a lot for you to take in, but without wishing to add to the decisions you are now facing, I have to urge you to think about safeguarding and preserving your fertility.’ Perhaps Tim understood instantly what the oncologist was talking about, but I was several pages behind him. ‘There is a strong possibility that your treatment will affect your ability to father a child in the future, so at this point we would recommend you to consider freezing your sperm.’

For one crazy moment I imagined he was talking about doing so at home, where it would sit on the shelf beside the packets of pork chops and Birds Eye peas. It took a few moments for the image to disappear.

‘There are several fertility clinics that we can refer you to. They will be able to explain the various options open to you. These can range from freezing sperm to even freezing embryos, if you should choose.’

‘Embryos?’ Tim asked, his voice ringing with confusion.

‘It’s one option to consider. There are excellent statistics for successful pregnancies resulting from cryogenically stored embryos. For couples your age and in your situation, it is definitely something worth thinking about.’

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We had visited a clinic just two days later. Scarcely enough time to consider what we were doing, or why. The possibility of Tim facing a life-threatening disease was still so overwhelming to us that everything else seemed like white noise. We’d left the fertility clinic with armloads of pamphlets and advice ringing in our ears. In the end, we had made the decision not because of the success rates, graphs, or testimonials we’d read until late into

the night, as though cramming for an exam. We'd made the decision with our hearts.

'We'll be making a baby,' I said, snuggling up against the man I loved and trying not to notice how much thinner he seemed than only a month or so earlier.

'And then freezing it. We'd quite literally be putting our child – or children – on ice.'

'Actually, I think they store them in liquid nitrogen,' I corrected, a new expert in a field I'd known next to nothing about only a few days earlier.

'We'd also be putting you through all kinds of invasive procedures unnecessarily. Because there's nothing wrong with *you*,' Tim had said, and it was impossible not to hear the pain and regret in his voice. He was angry. No, more than that, he was *furious* with his body for failing him so cataclysmically for the first time in all of its thirty years.

‘We don’t know how long it’s going to take you to beat this thing,’ I reasoned, hoping the positivity in my voice was powerful enough to fool him. ‘And it could be *years* before we’re ready for children. This way we won’t have to worry about whether my fertility has dropped off by the time we’re ready. We’d already have a freeze-dried baby all ready to go.’

‘Just add water,’ he had joked, pulling me even closer against his bony ribcage.

‘Exactly,’ I said, my mouth against his skin, where hopefully he couldn’t feel the trembling of my lips or the dampness on my cheeks from the tears that were falling silently in the darkness of our bedroom.

‘Let’s go for it then,’ he whispered into my hair. ‘Let’s make some babies.’