

shirt cuffs and fiddling with his watch, off in his own world. Mom sat at the vanity, putting on her makeup. Amy waited for the right moment, and then fired the first shot.

She flopped onto the bed and heaved a sigh. “Can we *please* do something else today? Go outside, or rent some DVDs? I don’t want to be stuck here all day again with nothing to do.”

“I thought you had a good book to read.” Mom leaned in toward the mirror, and attacked the shadows under her eyes with a fat tube of makeup.

“No . . . I finished that one. And my other one looks kinda boring.” It was a historical romance, not the genre she liked to read, but a friend had recommended the book.

“There’s always the TV.”

“It’s called a ‘tellie’ here,” her brother said. Ben was reading a guide book, lounging in a chair near the opening between the rooms.

“No thanks.” She grabbed a pillow and squeezed it in her hands. “There are some wacky shows on the TV here.”

“It’s a ‘tellie!’”

Amy wanted to throw the pillow at her brother, but exercised great restraint.

Her mother shook her head. “I’m sorry, dear. I don’t know what to tell you. You have to stay in here, and find something to do, at least for a few more days.”

“A few more days! I can’t stand it.” Amy rolled onto her front, watching her mother. “This place is a tomb.”

From the outside, the hotel looked decent enough, a clean and freshly painted row house, stacked between a bunch of other row houses. But the inside was gross. Pale wood flooring and paneling, orange and brown bedspreads, thick curtains of the same color, and furniture with sharp corners. Even with the blinds wide open, the light failed to chase away the gloom. Pipes and cords lay exposed on the walls, as if plumbing and electricity were an afterthought. There were two televisions, one in each room, flat-screen models screwed to the wall. They were the brightest things around.

“A real tomb.”

Ben burst out laughing. Was he laughing at the guidebook, or at her? Amy shot him a look, and strangled the pillow some more.

“You promised us a better place.” She glanced back at her mom. “You said we’d have an apartment, with rooms of our own, a place closer to the lab. You said we’d get a bigger TV, and a kitchen where you can cook normal food.”

“I know, I did. But the lab said it wouldn’t be ready until early next week. A few more days, that’s all.”

Before she could continue her assault, Dad walked over to the vanity and planted himself against the wall. “Strange though, isn’t it, Sheryl?”