

Flashes

By Esther Aardsma

I'm not sure how I ended up in this profession.

As a seven-year-old, I was determined to perfect my cartwheel so I could be chosen by a traveling coach searching for a potential future Olympic gymnastics champion. Yeah, maybe *Nadia* had something to do with that. We couldn't afford gymnastics lessons, so I tried to teach myself. After landing with an elbow in the back of my knee—harder than it sounds, actually—Mom made my big brothers deconstruct the homemade two-by-four balance beam I'd begged them to build me, and then she forbade any more gymnastics.

By age nine, I would have settled for figure skating. I caught my first glimpse of the figure skating Olympics on a friend's TV and fell in love with the grace and beauty of the dance. I guess the edge of danger called to me, too. I broke my wrist sliding on the ice in my hand-me-down leaky boots in the ditch in our backyard, and that was the end of that. Mom said we couldn't afford any more ER visits. Mike and Noles got in trouble as they were supposed to be “watching” me (Mom's code for “keeping me from trying anything stupid like a double axel, especially in boots that are too big and fall off mid-spin”). My bright purple cast was a small consolation.

I don't remember exactly how or when it started, but I seriously wanted to be an astronaut after that. The obsession persisted into my teens. Mom was relieved, as there wasn't a lot I could act on with the whole hunks-of-metal-in-empty-vacuum thing. I wasn't doing anything more dangerous than coming in to bed covered in mosquito bites after staring up at the stars late into the night. Nobody else was awake when I'd creep inside, and it would feel a little lonely, but in some ways, I liked it. Looking back, I knew that my bubble was whole, and even the worst of loneliness or sadness happened in the embrace of the knowledge that someone else who cared was always there.

I loved those stargazing nights. I felt something powerful in those stars. Something like the triumph scene of *Nadia* totally rocking her final uneven bars despite the blood seeping through the bandages on her arm. Something like the mesmerized captivation I'd feel watching a guy and

a girl flawlessly dance on slick ice, their movements blending until they became extensions of the same individual. Beauty, and danger, and power—and a yearning to be a part of it.

But then, life started the falling-apart part with the cliché phone call.

“Hello, this is Laura.” I had picked up the phone as I was the closest when it rang. Such were the family rules.

“This is Officer Clayton McAlister. Is a parent of Michael and Nolan Sanders available? May I speak to them, please?” I still remember the guy’s voice—middle-aged, professional, with a clipped and stressed undertone that instantly sent a chill down my arms.

“Yeah, um...let me see if I can find my mom,” I mumbled, then ran to find her.

She put the phone to her ear—funny, phones used to have cords then, and her fingers were curling nervously into the grungy corkscrew—and her face went so white, it was almost green.

I knew. I don’t know how I knew, but I did. My big brothers weren’t coming home. Ever. Like, ever *ever*.

In that moment, my bubble popped. I walked up to my bedroom—the one facing Mike’s and Noles’s—and I just stared out the window. The ditch was overflowing from the week of spring rain. The old willow tree still sported rusty, bent nails from a two-by-four ladder built and abandoned to rot ages ago.

Behind me, Mom cleared her throat. “Mike—” Her voice broke, and I could tell she couldn’t keep going.

“They’re gone, aren’t they.” My voice wasn’t even mine. Cold, hard, dull. Like space junk floating around the back side of the moon.

Mom choked behind me, then coughed. “They were hit—they never made it to Bryan’s.”

I knew I should turn; I knew I should be there for her, that my arms should be the comfort that she wouldn’t get anywhere else. But my eyes were someone else’s, seeing only the ripple of the muddy water, the flashes of light like stars disappearing into a nebula’s shroud, the patterns like a skater swirling around her partner until she was swallowed by the gravitational eddies, the rushing strength like a gymnast plunging into a tumble but not coming back up.

“I know.” I didn’t want danger anymore. It was only fun when I knew I was safe inside my bubble. I didn’t want power or beauty. It had all been taken, and I didn’t want to fight for it anymore. I’d probably have to face my dad at their funeral—the single person who I never wanted to see again—and even that thought was lifeless, and numb.

“Laura? Laura, they’re ready for you.”

I blink, the rushing, muddy ditch water fading to a nurse in navy blue scrubs. Behind her is a clinically calming mural, a savannah featuring giraffes and lions that look far too friendly. I shake my head a little and take a sip of my latte, grateful for the warmth to my inner chill.

I set my coffee down and heft my camera bag up to the chair next to me. I unzip it, gently extracting the Nikon. It’s an older model now, but I like imagining that it still has Mike’s fingerprints on it, layered under mine all these years. I keep his last picture of Nolan on it, despite all the images I’ve saved and deleted since their deaths. I guess I’m a little weird that way.

“You’re sure you’re ready for this?” the nurse asks.

I sigh. She must be new to this. I’m not.

“Cuz Kayleigh is just...something. None of us are ready—” She swallows.

“Yeah.”

I step into Room 546, camera up and ready. But I freeze, and the camera drifts down.

Kayleigh Rawlins, age six. Terminal brain cancer. Expected to die within the next two weeks. My job is to capture her last moments with her family. At least we know they are her last moments, so we can capture them.

But her walls are plastered with nebulae and galaxies and hopeful astronauts painting starry flowers.

And her dad is holding her hands as she fights to point her toes on her—*is that a two-by-four balance beam in a hospital onco-peds ward*—causing her wispy skater dress to flow around her like some ethereal fairy.

And she turns and smiles at me, her skin waxy pale and her eyes bloodshot and her scalp painfully bald and bruises and bandages and IVs threatening to wear her instead of the other way around—

And I see beauty.

And power.

And danger.

And I want to be a part of it. More than I have wanted anything in a long, long time.

I lift the camera.

