

I WAS A TEENAGE POPSICLE

By Bev Katz Rosenbaum

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WHAT the freakin' heck—

Oh, crap. Can't move that way. Hurts too much.

Nope, can't move that way, either. I'm almost as sore as I was after that marathon beach yoga session, the one where we raised money for the Venice Veggie Hut when it was going out of business...

Where the heck am I, anyway? Everything looks so fuzzy...

Wait a minute. Things are getting clearer. Oh, great. Looks like I'm in a hospital. White walls, doctors, monitors, the whole bit.

Yikes! One of the doctors is leaning over me so closely, he's practically on top of me. Way to scare the crap out of a girl, doc. Especially since you're a freaking Einstein clone, complete with crazy hair and buggy eyes.

Omigod, his eyes are so wide, they look like they're going to explode. And he's holding his breath. What the heck is he so excited about?

"Where am I?" I manage to spit out.

Oh, jeez, now he's tearing up. Um, hello, *I'm* the confused, injured one here?

He swipes at his eyes. "You're in a safe place, Floe. I'm Dr. Dixon."

"This is a hospital, right?" I ask. God, I can hardly talk. My mouth is all weird. Feels like I haven't opened it in months.

"Sort of," he says carefully. Or evasively—I can't tell. "We've been...taking care of you. After some rehabilitation, you'll be ready to go home."

“What’s wrong with me?” I ask, even as vague memories come back to me. Other hospitals—less modern looking than this one. Doctors talking about stuff I don’t understand—though I catch the most important point: I have lymphoma, a highly contagious respiratory disease...

“Was I in a coma?” I ask slowly. My tongue seems to be having trouble moving, and I’m parched.

“Uh, not exactly,” the doctor says. Evasively again? “But you have been unconscious for some time.”

“How long?” I choke out. “Are my parents here?” I start to panic when he doesn’t answer right away.

“No, Floe,” the doctor says softly, “they’re not.”

I stiffen. Maybe I’m crazy, but suddenly I know I’ve been ‘asleep’ for a very long time. And I also know my parents aren’t around any more.

“I’m one of those YA girls,” I whisper, “aren’t I?”

“What?” the doctor asks, confused.

“You know, YA books? Young adult novels? I’ve read about a million books with girls in comas who wake up after, like, fifteen years and can’t get used to the new time period.”

He smiles. “Oh, you haven’t been in a coma, Floe.”

“So what’s going on?” I ask suspiciously. This guy is definitely hiding something.

He looks at me straight on. Despite the scary hair, he seems nice, and suddenly I trust him to tell me the truth.

“You haven’t been in a coma.” He pauses and takes a breath. “You’ve been frozen.”

I stare at him. “Excuse me?”

He smiles again. Apparently, my predicament, terrifying to me, is thrilling to him. “We have a lot to talk about, Floe.”

“Yeah, like that part about me being frozen. What the heck do you mean I’ve been frozen? And what about my lymposis? Am I worse? Better? Dying?”

Now he looks even happier. “Good news on all counts. You’re completely cured—definitely not dying.”

Holy cow! I’m not sick any more! “I’m...all better?” I say, just to confirm.

He smiles yet again. “Yup.”

“Wait a minute. You said something about rehabilitation.” I start to panic again. “Did I lose an important organ or something?” Instinctively, my hand goes to my throat, then my chest. Everything feels normal. Better than normal, in fact. My skin feels totally smooth.

I look at my arms and legs. Where have all my blading scars and scabs gone?

Okay, I’m starting to get just the teensiest bit spooked, complete cure or not.

The doctor puts a hand on my shoulder. Cheerfully, as if I’m recovering from the flu, as opposed to a potentially fatal respiratory disease, he says, “Let’s get you up so you can come into my office and we’ll talk. Have some juice first.” He hands me a cup of orange juice on the night table beside my bed. “Take your time. Slow sips.”

I take a small sip and start coughing.

“You haven’t used those muscles in a while,” he says, still smiling. That smile is definitely starting to get on my nerves.

“Or maybe you’re poisoning me. I’m not supposed to accept drinks from strangers.” Too late, I remember this important bit of advice from my Women’s Studies teacher at Venice Alternative School. Which isn’t really an alternative school, since in Venice, ‘alternative’ is normal.

He nods slowly. “I understand. You’re alone, you’re afraid, you don’t know what’s going on.” He pauses. “There *is* someone here for you. I’ll bring her in after we’ve talked.”

“My mother?” I say hopefully. Maybe my hunch was wrong.

He shakes his head. “No, I’m very sorry, Floe. Your parents are...gone.”

I knew it. One of my last memories is of my dad telling me my mother had also contracted lymphoma.

“My dad, too?” I ask softly.

“Yes,” he says quietly. “It wasn’t your fault, Floe. The Venice outbreak was unexpected and highly contagious.” He smiles. “I have some good news, though. I can revive them as well.”

I look at him sharply. “What are you talking about? They’re dead. What kind of doctor are you, anyway?” He’s scaring me, and when I get scared, I get mouthy. Mouthier than usual, that is.

He perches at the side of my bed, studies at me even more intensely than before, and says, “Floe, have you ever heard of cryonics?”

And then I know.

You’ve been frozen.

I was a teenage popsicle.

“I...died...and they—froze me?”

Dr. Dixon nods. “You died so young. Your parents wanted to give you the gift of a second chance at life.”

“So they...froze me.” I can’t seem to stop saying it.

“Well, yes and no,” he says. “That’s the term people use—even I use it on occasion—but the process is actually called vitrification. Freezing can preserve organs, but it also destroys cells. Vitrification preserves the same way freezing does, without damaging cells. At least, the way we started doing it when you were brought in. We’d just discovered a wonderful new way to cryo-preserve whole bodies. Before that--”

I cut him off. “But I was *dead*.”

Dr. Dixon nods. “Ever see the movie *The Princess Bride*?”

“Yeah, it’s one of my faves.” I’m even more confused than before. “Why?”

“Remember when Miracle Max said, ‘There’s a big difference between mostly dead and all dead’?”

I can’t help but chuckle—Miracle Max cracked me up in that movie.

Unfortunately, laughing leads to a major choking fit. Dr. Dixon hands me the juice, and I drink again without thinking. Darn!

“Yeah,” I sputter when I can talk again. “I remember.”

“Well, let’s just say you weren’t really dead.”

“Excuse me?” I say for the second time since waking up.

Naturally, the doctor smiles again. “You see, Floe, people are considered legally dead when their heart and breathing stops. But when you’re declared legally dead, it doesn’t mean all your cells, tissues and organs are dead.”

“I see,” I say. I don’t, really. I stink at science. And he’s kind of freaking me out.

He perseveres. “In your case, there was a great standby team at the time of so-called death. My wife was working at the Marshland Lung Clinic in New York, where you’d been flown. And we were able to initiate cooling procedures precisely when you were declared legally dead, before the crucial five or ten minutes before your brain started decomposing.”

Okay, this is all a bit much for me.

The doc doesn’t seem to realize this. He happily chatters on. “Then, once you were here at the Venice Cryonics Center, we were able to preserve you in a vat of our groundbreaking new solution—a combination of liquid nitrogen and several newly discovered chemicals. Shortly after that, my wife figured out how to reverse the progress of your disease. And around the same time, I realized how I could efficiently de-vitrify people.”

“Wow,” I say, kind of stunned.

“After you were de-vitrified,” he continues, “we promptly got your heart started up again. There’s been a lot of progress made in that department, too. And after we got your heart started, we administered the cure for your disease.”

“Oh...”

“It’s a lot to take in.” Dr. Dixon says, finally reading my mind. He lets go of my shoulders and pats one. “That’s why we’re going to keep you here for a while.”

“Well,” I say, wanting, suddenly, to keep things normal, “that vitrification stuff really did wonders.” I stare at my arm. “My skin looks like a baby’s bum.”

Dr. Dixon’s smile widens even more. (I didn’t think it was possible.)

“Wonderful, isn’t it?” he says. That’s the new liquid nitrogen solution—with some new

artificial chemicals added in to guard against damage. You were kept in a big vat of it. It's like you had a full-body chemical peel!"

I shudder and try to imagine how I'm gonna tell people I just emerged from a giant vat of liquid nitrogen. This is taking alternative to a whole new level.

I search my mind for something—anything—to distract myself from that wee problem. But all I can think of are new cryonics related problems. Like what it will be like living in a world full of zombies.

"So now there are all these other thawed people roaming the earth?" I ask Dixon, not really wanting to know the answer.

He fairly beams this time. "Nope. Just you. You're the first."

Oh, that's great. Even the alternative types in Venice will think I'm a freak.

Once again, Dixon puts his hands on my shoulders and lays the intense look on me. "Your parents had a lot of foresight."

"Speaking of my parents... You said they can be thawed, revived, cured, like me?"

"Technically, you weren't thawed—"

"Yeah, yeah, I wasn't frozen, I was vitrified, I know."

"Yes," he says quickly. "They can be thawed. And they will be. I'd like to observe you for a while first, though."

"So where am I going to go in the meantime?" I ask, panicked again. "Who am I going to live with? Where's Sunny?" Sunny--short for Sunshine--is my kid sister.

"She's still alive, right?" *Please, God, let Sunny still be alive. I know I said she was a pain in the butt about ten million times, but I never wanted her dead...*

Dr. Dixon pats my arm. “Sunny’s just fine, and she’s here, waiting to see you. You’re going to go live with her.”

“Live with her?” Okay, this guy really is crazy. “What do you mean live with her? She’s like, thirteen. She’s three years younger than me.”

Dr. Dixon gives me the hugest smile of the day and says, “Floe, you were vitrified for ten years.”

Before it sinks in that I’m really twenty-six even though I still look and feel like sixteen, Dr. Dixon gestures to one of the doctors standing on the other side of the room, who, in turn, gestures someone in from the hall.

And in walks this California suburb type chick.

She comes closer. Strange. She’s got Sunny’s eyes. But this can’t be my sister...

“Floe?” the girl/woman says excitedly. “Omigod, I can’t believe it! This is *soooo* freaky!”

Okay, maybe it is Sunny. Clearly, only her body has matured. And I thought *I* was the one frozen in time.

I immediately feel bad thinking such mean thoughts. Poor Sunny. She had to endure three deaths in the family when she was just thirteen and, I’m guessing, had to live with distant relatives or strangers till she was of age...

“Omigod,” Sunny says again, “how do you feel? Can I get you anything?”

“I’m...okay,” I say cautiously. *Okay, steady now. She’s your younger sister, but now she’s your older sister...*

Dr. Dixon looks at me intently for a moment, then puts a hand on Sunny’s shoulder. “The re-integration process will be terribly stressful for her. As I told you, we’ll be keeping her here for several days, for physical therapy, mental health counseling,

and modern life lessons. Remember, she has ten years to catch up on. You'll be able to visit her during this process, but please, remember to take things very slowly."

"Oh, sure, I get it, Doc. You're saying I shouldn't introduce her to my husband yet? Or my baby?"

I drop my glass of juice, and everything goes black again.

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PICKUP day.

The sun's glare doesn't hurt me as much as it did the first time I was brought outside and toured around the new Venice.

Sunny and her unemployed used car salesman husband Andrew and their adorable baby Jake have come to get me in their electric van. My sis isn't at all progressive—everybody has them now. They're wearing matching orange unitards. I can't quite believe unitards are actually a thing. Or crystal jewelry. Or hoverblades, which I tried to master at the Centre and couldn't for the life of me get the hang of. *Sooo* frustrating. I was an ace roller blader back in the day...

I feel my eyes misting. Once I'm spirited away to the far-off L.A. suburb of Cactus Hill Sunny lives in now, I might not get back to Venice much, if at all.

Abe and Bea have come out to the parking lot to see us off, but they seem weirdly distracted—as they have the last couple of days. Something's up—I don't know what. I can only hope Abe hasn't discovered we're going to turn into monkeys or something.

Nah, that can't be it, or he wouldn't be letting us leave.

Whatever. I have other things to worry about. Like how the heck I'm going to survive in Cactus Hill.

I hug the doctors tightly.

"We'll be in touch," Abe promises, giving me a quick kiss on the cheek. "Good luck."

“Thanks,” I manage to say, wanting nothing more than to grab on to his lab coat and beg him to keep me here.

“Ugh, that place is so Venice,” Sunny says as we walk to the car.

“What’s wrong with Venice?” I say.

Andrew, who has his arm around Sunny, turns to look at me and smiles patronizingly. “Do you even have to ask? With the upbringing you had?”

I look at him. “My upbringing was just fine, thank you,” I snap. “Who’s this guy to talk, anyway? He’s an *unemployed used car salesman*.”

“Whoa, don’t get all defensive,” he says, like I’m some five-year-old who has to be indulged. “It was just a little...different, that’s all.”

Sunny rolls her eyes. “That’s one word for it. Here we are,” she says when we get to the car. “Thank God.” She glances back at the center. “That place gives me the creeps.” She shakes her head. “Freezing people. Another one of their freakin’ crazy ideas.” She looks at me. “Though your skin looks fabulous.” She pauses. “Not that anyone has bad skin anymore. Plastic surgery’s like dentistry now. I see my guy every six months.”

I try to push the image of a suburb full of Real Housewife lookalikes out of my head. “If it wasn’t for that ‘freaking crazy idea’, Sunny, I wouldn’t be here talking to you right now!”

Now *she’s* the one smiling indulgently, which kind of sends me up the wall. *This is my little sister!*

“Floe, Floe, Floe,” she says, opening the back door for me and Jake. I climb in while she secures Jake in his car seat and Andrew puts my stuff in the trunk. Once she’s on the passenger side of the front seat, she says, “Of course I’m *ecstatic* you’re here...”

Yeah, sure.

“But you have to admit, Mom and Dad didn’t exactly put a lot of thought into this whole thing.”

Patience, I tell myself. I’m grateful Sunny is still alive. I’m grateful Sunny is still alive. I calm myself down by smiling at my gorgeous nephew, who rewards me with a smile back and a sweet little cooing noise.

Once I feel I can trust myself to speak, I say, “I understand I went downhill fairly quickly. I don’t think they had much time to think.”

Sunny sighs as Andrew pulls out of the lot. “Floe, you know as well as I do that they weren’t big on, you know, thinking.”

Like you are? You’re twenty-three and you have a baby and a mortgage and an unemployed husband!

I don’t talk to them the rest of the way home.

Which turns out to be a huge pile of bricks without an ounce of character.

And it’s decorated in an aggressively modern style. The minute I step into it, I feel a sharp longing for my parents’ chaotic Venice place.

“Nice, huh?” Sunny says smugly. “And we own, don’t even rent.”

“Mmm.” *I am grateful Sunny is still alive. I am grateful Sunny is still alive.*

“So,” she continues, oblivious to my horror at the prospect of living on the U.S.S. Enterprise, “let me show you your room.” She takes my small bag from Andrew after showering him with a bunch of disgustingly sloppy kisses. She saves a couple for Jake, whom she orders Andrew to put down in his crib.

I obediently follow her upstairs—to a tiny little cubicle with a mattress on the floor. The ‘room’ is painted white. There are no moldings, baseboards, rugs—nothing. On the mattress, there’s a white sheet, a white comforter, and a white pillow.

“Is this some kind of joke?” I ask.

Sunny frowns. “Don’t be silly. It’s spare. Very fashionable.” She tosses her head. “After living in that crazy Venice house, I would think you’d crave some—“

“Emptiness?” I say. “A chilly, as opposed to warm atmosphere? An environment that makes me feel about as welcome as the plague?”

Sunny takes a breath and says, “You’re a teenager, Floe, and I know you have all these *feelings* to deal with—“

“Including those of horror upon learning I’ve just been brought back from the dead.”

She clears her throat. “Yes, well, it’s no excuse for acting *badly*.”

I fight the urge to laugh, then I sigh again. “May I please have my bag?”

She smiles, the perfect sister/mom now. “Of course, *dear*. I’ll let you get settled, and then we’ll have some dinner.”

I look around my ‘room’. “Where, exactly, am I supposed to, um, settle my things?” Not that I have that much. An old pic of my parents and a couple outfits my parents gave the doc.

She points to the one shelf in the room. I sigh. “What’s for dinner?”

“Beef stew,” she answers promptly.

I look at her. “I’m a vegetarian.”

Sunny smiles. “Darling, when you’re living in your own home, you can cook whatever you want, but in *my* home, you play by *my* rules.”

She turns to go. Frowning, she turns back. “Actually, come down to the kitchen as soon as you’re done here. We have to discuss a few things.”

Oh, no we don’t, I almost retort, but stop myself. Horrifying as the situation is, the reality is that my little sister is in charge now.

Clearly, I’m going to have to pick my battles...

I’M down in about five minutes. I’d have dragged it out longer, but there’s absolutely nothing to do in my room. Nothing to even look at. I think I once read about a form of torture involving a similar room.

When I get to the kitchen, Andrew and Sunny gesture me over to the marble table.

“Come, let’s talk, Floe.” Sunny’s tone is annoyingly parental.

Oh, lord save me. I close my eyes and take a few deep breaths to stay calm.

“Is she meditating?” Andrew asks in disgust.

Sunny says impatiently, “Floe, meditation is *so* over.” She pats a kitchen chair—a hard chrome thing beside her. “Sit down. You’ll feel much better when you know what to expect in the days ahead. Let’s go over your schedule.”

Schedule?

She nods firmly. “I know Mom and Dad and VA never believed in them, but Andrew and I believe that scheduling equals success.”

And that’s why you’re so successful, I think but don’t say.

“On the computer screen here you’ll see your Cactus Hill Secondary School schedule. I took the liberty of getting you registered.”

“What?”

“You heard me. I got you registered at school. You’re welcome,” she adds pointedly.

“But I don’t want to go to Cactus Hill Secondary School,” I say, trying desperately to sound reasonable so she can’t accuse me of being an over-emotional teenager again.

“Of course you’re going to Cactus Hill Secondary School,” Sunny responds. “It’s our local school. We’re in an excellent school district,” she adds proudly.

“Isn’t there an alternative school or something in the neighborhood?” I ask helplessly.

Andrew looks at me like I’ve just suggested we eat maggots for dinner.

“There’s no alternative school around here, and you’re *not* going to Venice Alternative,” Sunny says flatly.

“Why not?” I plead, hating that I’ve been reduced to acting like this. “Why can’t I?”

Sunny draws herself up, attempting to look authoritative. I have a sneaking suspicion she’s really enjoying this. For one brief moment, I almost regret shaving all her dolls’ heads way back when. Clearly, this is payback time.

“For one thing--” Sunny’s being all snotty suburban mom now “—Venice Alternative is too far. For another, I don’t approve of the educational program there.”

“There must be a way—“

“There isn’t,” Sunny says curtly.

I take it back. I don’t regret shaving her dolls’ heads. Matter of fact, I wish I’d hacked them into little pieces, which is what my disturbed friend Shanna did to all her sisters’ dolls.

I cross my arms. “This is about the dolls isn’t it?”

“Dolls? Floe, what on earth are you talking about?”

“You never forgave me for shaving your dolls’ heads.”

She smiles at Andrew. “For some reason, she thinks I actually care about—even remember—things that happened decades ago.”

Could she really have forgotten? I wonder. She was pretty traumatized at the time.

I decide to test her. Looking at Andrew, I say, “I *was* kind of a pain in the butt. She was this little goody-goody and I was this blader chick. I gave her a hard time.”

“That’s putting it mildly,” Sunny mutters.

Aha. She does remember!

“But that’s what sisters are for, right?” I lean over and punch her arm. “It was all in good fun. There was no harm done.”

She stares. “Is that what you think?” Her voice rises. “You think that was ‘harmless fun’? Maybe if Mom and Dad had actually given you some boundaries,” she explodes, “I might have been able to enjoy my childhood! But no, you were their precious rebellious pre-teen, and as far as they were concerned, shaving my dolls’ heads was *performance art!*”

Oh, wow, I can’t believe it. My sister actually has a point. I *shouldn’t* have done what I did, and I probably should have been punished, as opposed to praised, for the act of defacing her dolls.

”I loved my dolls,” Sunny mutters.

Oh, crap. Now I feel like an ungrateful witch. I lean over and hug her awkwardly. “I know you did, Sun. I’m sorry. You’re right. I shouldn’t have done that,

and Mom and Dad shouldn't have taken it so lightly." I refrain from adding, *But you were an insufferable little prig.*

She looks at me while Andrew takes over the hug and glares at me. "Do you really mean that?" she says quietly.

"Yup," I answer quickly, not wanting to drag this out—or make her feel like she's perfect and I'm the only flawed person sitting at this table.

I sigh inwardly. Mom and Dad can't be thawed fast enough. Living with Sunny is going to be downright dangerous, what with all that childhood baggage lying around, waiting to be tripped over.

I decide a change of topic is a really good idea "Hey, did I tell you I saw the Windsongs a few days ago?" The Windsongs were old Venice artist friends of my folks. I saw them on the way back to the Center after my Venice tour.

"You did?" Sunny asks, her eyes going wide. I can just see the wheels turning in her mind, and I get ticked off at her all over again. She's probably thinking, *Great, now everybody knows I have a freak for a sister!*

"Yeah, I told them I was just recently thawed, brought back from the dead, and cured. They seemed a little surprised."

"You...didn't," Sunny says, breaking away from Andrew.

"No, I didn't." I force myself not to roll my eyes. "I let them think I never died, that I was just sick this whole time."

"So they think you were, like, in a coma?" Andrew says. Wow, no wonder he's unemployed. Clearly, while I was sleeping, scientists did *not* figure out how to improve human intelligence.

Again, I have to restrain myself from rolling my eyes. "Something like that."

Sunny looks relieved. “Well, good. That’s what we’ll tell people if they ask. I’ve been lucky. I haven’t been back to Venice once. Haven’t seen anybody from the old days.”

She seems so happy to have completely remade her life, I’m even more ticked off. Especially since she doesn’t seem to have done a very good job with her new one, what with being jobless and married to Andrew.

Sunny draws herself up in her chair. “So anyway, we’ve decided to give you a weekly allowance.”

Andrew names a figure that would have been considered cheap ten years ago.

“Here’s this week’s haul,” Sunny says brightly, like she’s handing me bags of gold or something.

Well, they are both unemployed. And beggars can’t be choosers.

I sigh and say, “When do you think Abe will be defrosting Mom and Dad?”

They exchange a glance.

“We just found out some bad news that might affect Mom and Dad,” Sunny says.

“What are you talking about? She’s frozen. So is Dad. Abe told me he’s going to thaw them soon.”

Silently, my little-big sister turns on a wall-mounted TV.

“We saw this while you were upstairs,” she says softly. I hear a unitard-clad news reader say: *This just in: A lawsuit has been brought against the Venice Beach Cryonics Center and its owner, Dr. Abercrombie Dixon, by disgruntled relatives of a longtime client. Dixon could be forced to cease business in a matter of weeks.*

“No,” I whisper as Sunny shuts off the TV.

“I’m so sorry, hon,” Sunny says, almost as if she means it.

I'm totally panicked. I can't live with Sunny permanently! This is supposed to be a temporary thing! Mom and Dad are supposed to be coming back! With a lawsuit to deal with, there's no way the Dixons will have the time or mental energy they'll need to thaw and school other clients...

I scramble up from the table.

"Floe, where are you going?" Sunny says. "Floe, come back here!"

"Floe, you heard what your sister said," Andrew says, trying desperately not to sound like the total loser he is, "come back here!"

But I'm already out the door, on my way to the Center.

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THANK God Sunny and Andrew take pity on me and pick me up after I walk a few blocks. I have no idea how to even get to Venice from here—no clue if buses run there, or what. I do suspect my “allowance” is probably about one fiftieth the cost of cab fare.

A while later--a *very* long while, as Sunny keeps reminding me--I'm at the Center, in Abe's office. I'm a little jangled, as we were pestered by reporters and protesters on the way in. I'm guessing the latter group included the suing people and their supporters. I vaguely recognized one of the speechmakers from a politics class Abe gave us at the Center: a local congressman named Dick Jones, a slick looking guy with an obvious flair for self-promotion.

Bea is in Abe's office, too, looking grim. Sunny and Andrew are waiting outside. I demanded privacy.

“What's going on?” I ask them. “You've got to tell me!”

Abe runs a hand through his hair. “The lawsuit happened so fast and I didn't want to traumatize you any further. I didn't think it would become public.”

“We didn't think, period. We're very sorry you had to hear about it like that, Floe,” Bea says softly.

“Yeah, so am I,” I say grimly. “So who are these people?”

Abe sighs. “John and Judy Smith. John's mother insisted on being vitrified years ago. He and his wife think it's just a money grab, since they haven't seen any evidence that the process works.”

I look at the docs. “I'm evidence.”

Abe smiles sadly. “Yes, you are, but Floe, you can’t tell people yet. It’s too soon.”

“The consequences would be too terrible for you to bear,” Bea adds.

“Why don’t you let *me* be the judge of that?” I say, even though I don’t particularly *want* to tell people I’m a thawed zombie.

He shakes his head. “No, I can’t let you do that.”

“But... if you’re forced to close... My parents...”

“Floe, I’m so sorry.” Again, he runs a hand through his hair. “I promise to do the very best I can to keep the Center afloat. We’ll try to come up with some other way to defend ourselves.”

“But...can you even afford the legal bills?”

Abe sighs deeply. Avoiding the question, he says, “Look, Floe, you need your parents, and I want to give them to you. I *will* give them to you.” He pauses. “But there’s a very small chance I won’t be able to. In the unlikely event that you and Taz turn out to be the only ones we’re able to thaw, you can’t go public.”

He’s right, I think. I can’t go public.

Not while I’m living in Cactus Hill, anyway. It would be easier if I lived in Venice. There, if you say you’re the reincarnation of Count Dracula, people just nod and say, “Cool.”

I’d probably be stoned to death in Cactus Hill.

THEY’LL stone me, anyway, I decide the next day, my first one at Cactus Hill Secondary School. Even without having my thawed zombie status made public, I’m an

outcast here. It's January, and it's double trouble to be the new kid in the middle of the school year. And everything—I mean everything—has changed.

Despite having been told about holographic instructors, I can't help but stare.

"Do you ever get used to them?" I whisper to a girl who looks friendlier than the others. She has red hair and freckles, and I imagine she's sort of a modern-day Anne of Green Gables.

Wrong.

She stares at me. "Are you warped or something?"

"Sorry," I say. "It's just that they didn't have...holographic teachers at my old school."

"Are you from, like, historical times?" she says, rolling her eyes.

"Nope, just Venice," I answer weakly. "I'm Floe." Not that she seems interested in getting to know me.

"Haley," she says, still looking at the hologram.

Who is spouting off about geometry, and I can't make heads or tails of it. Apparently, there have been huge leaps in the field since I last attended high school. Not that I understood it back then, either.

I wonder if you can ask a hologram for extra help.

It's the same in all my other classes, and the kids treat me like I'm an alien. I'm a thawed zombie, which is *completely* different.

The only class I do well in is Biology, where—hooray!—the holographic teacher has prepared a lesson on cryonics!

“Who can define cryonics?” the hologram asks in a monotone. Honestly, you’d think they could give these things personalities. School is an even bigger snooze than before.

I have to resist jumping up and screaming, “Oh me, me, me!” Instead, I just put my arm up. And—hooray again!—the teacher picks me!

“Cryonics is the practice of using cold to preserve life,” I recite proudly, and I don’t stop there. “The only problem is that while freezing preserves organs, it also expands and destroys cells. Which is why scientists working in the cryonics field have been using a combination of liquid nitrogen and some newly created artificial chemicals instead.” Whoops. I wonder if I was supposed to let that stuff about the new chemicals slip. I look at the hologram. It doesn’t appear to have registered this groundbreaking piece of information.

When I’m done, I realize I’ve hurt more than helped myself. Not only have I established myself as a geek *extraordinaire*, I’ve established myself as a *science* geek *extraordinaire*.

But it’s lunch that’s the worst. Like the rest of the school, the lunch room is sterile and unwelcoming, with white walls and cold, hard chairs. Just like at home, sweet home. I feel another almost physical longing for my old school, a hundred year old wood and stucco structure, the interior walls of which are plastered with student artwork.

I zero in on the red-haired girl, who happens to be surrounded by empty chairs.

I motion to the one next to her. “Mind if I sit here?” I ask as politely as I can manage. I feel like crying.

She shrugs.

Just then a mean looking blonde comes up to us. Well, up to Haley. “Who’s this?” she asks.

“Ashleigh, Floe. Floe, Ashleigh,” says Haley.

Ashleigh says an abrupt, “Hi.” And after quickly taking in my non-unitard outfit of a sweatshirt and jeans—one of the outfits my parents left for me—she turns away and says to Haley, “Smashball practice. You coming?”

“In a minute. You go ahead.”

Once she’s gone, Haley turns back to me and says, “Ashleigh Jones is sort of queen of the school.”

I refrain from saying, “Not a very polite one.” Not that Haley’s been uber-polite, but I sense she has friend potential.

Haley doesn’t respond, just pauses for a second before saying, “Don’t tick her off.”

“What gives you the idea I’d tick her off?”

She looks at me and cracks a half smile. “You don’t seem like you care too much about fitting in. Else you would have bought a unitard. Listen, her father is Dick Jones the congressman. The Joneses are pretty powerful in Cactus Hill.”

Holy crap! Ashleigh’s dad is the guy supporting the Smiths!

“It’s not like she’d have him ruin students,” I say.

Would she?

By the look in Haley’s eyes, I think the answer might be, “You’d be surprised.”

Better safe than sorry, I guess. He *could* make trouble for my social-climbing sister.

And worse than that, if the Joneses look for dirt on us, they might just dig up my frozen zombie past...

-4-

SUNNY comes in to say goodnight to me and I burst into tears.

“Oh, Floe,” Sunny says, sounding stricken. “This must be so hard for you.”

Okay, this is weird. It’s as if she’s suddenly remembered that as my guardian, she’s required to offer at least a little bit of comfort when I’m distressed. I blow my nose with a tissue from the box on the kitchen countertop and say, “Who are you and what did you do with my sister?”

She sighs and sits on a chair beside me. “I’m sorry if I haven’t been the ideal sister, or guardian, or whatever. This is all new and strange to me, too.”

I almost believe this. “I’m sorry, too,” I say contritely. “I know it hasn’t been easy for you, either. But I was a little freaked out when I got here, and I only thought about myself.”

She shakes her head. “It must have been so weird for you.”

“It was,” I admit. “It still is. I don’t know—“ my voice breaks “—if I’ll ever get used to it.”

She reaches over and hugs me again. “Oh, honey, you will.”

I smile and swipe at my tears. “I’m kinda tired. I think I’m gonna just go to sleep.”

“Okay. Tell you what. I’ll make you a special dinner tomorrow night. How does braised tofu sound?”

I lift my eyebrows. “You cook now?”

She shrugs. “I have all of Mom’s old cookbooks.”

I smile through my tears. “Hope you don’t burn everything like Mom used to.” Mom meant well, but she was a distracted artist.

Things aren’t so bad, I tell myself as I climb up the stairs. Well, Dixon ‘s unreachable. But I have a possible new friend in Haley, and it even looks like I may be entering a new stage in my relationship with Sunny.

I fall asleep vowing to really work on that relationship, and I dream about us hoverblading along the Venice boardwalk together...

It isn’t until the cold light of morning that I realize something is terribly wrong with this picture.

And I don’t mean the part about me hoverblading...

I become even more suspicious when Sunny refuses to give me money for a school trip. Unemployed people can’t afford to be homeowners. Especially when they never had such great jobs even when they did work. I have no idea what Sunny did while I was in the deep freezer, but I do know she didn’t go to university. And how much can even the best used car salesman make?

My parents were quite successful artists, despite the fact that they played up the boho thing to the max.

It’s time my sister and I sat down for a little talk about money.

But I’ve got to play it just right—be cool.

Nah, forget being cool. Better to come right out with it—not give her a chance to prepare an excuse.

“So, Sunny,” I say casually, taking a bite out of my blueberry muffin, “what’s happened to all of Mom and Dad’s money?”

She chokes on the orange juice she's sipping at the counter.

"Money?" she repeats, her eyes darting around, like she's checking for an escape route.

Crap. I was right. She looks totally panicked.

"What's wrong?" I ask.

"Wrong?" she says in a too-high voice. "Nothing's wrong. Why do you think something's wrong?"

"Morning, all," Andrew says, coming into the kitchen and planting a grossly sloppy kiss on Sunny's cheek. "Ready for some tennis today, hon?"

Honestly. Golf and tennis. Tennis and golf. Who does this guy think he is?

I can't help myself. "What did you guys do to earn enough money to live here like trust fund puppies?" I ask.

They exchange looks. *Aha!*

Sunny looks at me. "You're too young to discuss this with, Floe," she says imperiously. "Eat your breakfast. You have to get to school."

"You spent it, didn't you?"

"Spent what? What on earth are you talking about?" Sunny says, cracking an egg over a frying pan with a shaking hand.

"I'm guessing that whatever money Mom and Dad were so idiotic as to put you in charge of once you turned twenty-one, you used to buy this house," I say flatly.

Sunny throws down her spatula and turns to me with flashing eyes. "Okay, sis, you want to know the truth? Here's the truth. Most of their money went straight to the Cryonics Center. They thought it would work, and in a couple of years, everything would be back to normal."

“Well, they were right,” I point out.

Sunny gives me an exasperated look. “It took *ten years* for you! And they *still* might not come back!”

“They must have had other money put away if they thought we’d be coming back,” I persist. “You spent it, didn’t you?”

She crosses her arms. “What would *you* have done?”

I stare at her. “*Not* spent it?”

She throws her hands in the air. “How was I supposed to know the whole stupid cryonics thing would *work*? I mean, really, freezing people!”

“Vitrifying,” I mutter. I can barely believe what I’m hearing, and have no idea how to react.

“What?”

“We weren’t frozen. We were vitrified.” I shake my head. “I can’t believe it.”

Sunny puts her head in her hands. “I know. I’m stupid.”

Yes, you are, is what I want to say. But I almost feel sorry for her.

Wait ‘till Mom and Dad find out she’s blown all the dough that didn’t go to the Center—and on a Cactus Hill pile, of all things.

Andrew puts an arm around Sunny, but she throws it off and mutters, “I should never have listened to you!”

Uh-oh, I think. Trouble in paradise.

“But baby, freezing people—who knew?” he says helplessly.

“They weren’t frozen, they were vitrified!” she retorts.

“Um, guys?” I interrupt, “It doesn’t really matter now.”

Sunny stares at me. “What do you mean it doesn’t matter? Of course it matters. If Dixon gets out of that mess, Mom and Dad could be back with us in a few days.”

“I don’t think he’s going to get out of that mess anytime soon,” Andrew says, popping a muffin from a box on the counter into his mouth.

Sunny turns ice cold eyes on him. “Are you saying you’re hoping we’re *not* going to be reunited with my parents anytime soon?”

His eyes widen. “No, no! Nothing like that. All I meant was—“

I fold my arms and turn on him, too. “What *did* you mean, exactly?” I ask.

He begins to back away slowly. “Um, I’d better go—just remembered, early tee-off.”

“Great guy you’ve got there,” I say dryly to Sunny when the door slams behind him. “He actually left in his pyjamas.”

She sighs and runs a hand through her hair. “Listen, Floe, I’ll take care of everything.”

Now I turn on her. “Oh, you’ll take care of everything,” I say. “That’s great. I feel *much* better now. Taking care of it was exactly what you were supposed to be doing!”

“I know, I know!” she moans, wringing her hands. “Don’t you think I feel terrible?”

I soften a bit. But not completely. “So what are you planning to do?” I ask.

“I don’t know,” she says, twirling a strand of hair in her fingers, an old habit that suddenly makes me nostalgic. “You’re the smart one, not me,” she adds, coming over to sit across from me at the table. “But just so you know,” she says, “I didn’t go into mom and dad’s stash right away. I spent the first couple of years after I moved back here

living in crummy places. They sold the house before they died. That money went to Center. I did a bunch of crappy jobs.”

Okay, now I actually *do* feel bad for her.

Still...

“I realize you had it rough, Sunny, and I really am so sorry for all you went through,” I say, sighing, “but we need to get their money back. Plus more, so we can help Dixon with his legal bills so he won’t have to close the Center.”

Just then Andrew comes back in. “Pyjamas,” he explains sheepishly.

We both glare at him.

“So, are we all friends again?” he says brightly.

“Sure,” I say sweetly. “Say, Andrew, how do you feel about selling your house?”

He looks stricken. “The house? No—there has to be another way...”

“There’s no other way,” Sunny snaps. “Floe’s right.”

“But where will we live?” Andrew says.

Sunny and I look at each other. He has a point.

I sigh. “There is another way.”

They look at me eagerly. I should feel vindicated—the younger sister trumping the older sister—but I don’t.

Because the plan involves...

“Going public.” It’s the only way I can earn enough (via endorsements, books, etcetera) to help Dixon keep the center afloat, and get our parents’ nest egg back without making us all homeless.

“No,” Sunny responds instantly. “No way.”

“Oh, you weren’t worried about Mom and Dad’s money, but you’re worried about your precious reputation?”

“Is that what you think?” she says, her voice rising. “Well, for your information—“

“Girls, girls, calm down,” Andrew says, sliding the now-burnt egg Sunny had started frying out of the pan onto a plate. “Sunny, let’s hear her out.”

“She thinks I only consider myself,” Sunny says, pouting.

If the shoe fits... I might feel bad for her, but I’m still convinced if I’d been in her situation, I wouldn’t have gone into the money.

She looks at me. “I don’t want you to have to suffer. And trust me, you *will* suffer. Whether you’re here or in Venice.”

How ‘bout that? She actually sounds sincere.

“Okay,” I say. “But you know what else would come of telling my story?”

“What?” Andrew asks curiously.

“Lots and lots of money,” I state.

Andrew’s eyes light up. “Really? How?”

“Endorsements,” I explain simply.

A light appears to go on in Andrew’s head. “Right. Endorsements. You mean, like...”

I sigh. “Floe Ryan knows that Long Life batteries last as long as you need them to.”

Andrew laughs. “Hey, that’s funny.”

Sunny glares at him. “It is not.”

He looks hurt. “It is.”

“No way,” Sunny says firmly. “I’m your guardian and I say no.”

“Oh, right.” I snap my fingers. “You’re the guardian who stole all our parents’ money. Do you think I could have your guardianship revoked for that?”

She narrows her eyes. “You wouldn’t.”

“Watch me,” I retort. Then I sigh. “No, I wouldn’t.”

She sighs, too. “What else can I say, Floe? I’m sorry. But you can’t go public. I won’t let you.”

“It may not be as bad as you think,” I say, even though I know it will be.

“Yeah, Sunny, it may not be bad at all. Personally, I think people will love it.”

Sunny sighs. “Andrew, go get dressed. Golf, remember?”

He shrugs. “Okay.”

When he leaves, Sunny says, “We’ll get jobs. We have to, anyway, ‘cuz all the money’s close to being gone.”

I look at her doubtfully. “What kind of work did you say you did before you met Andrew?”

“You know, the usual Venice stuff. Coffee shops, bikini stores.”

Great. “Somehow, I don’t think a minimum wage job is going to recoup Mom and Dad’s nest egg, or help Dixon pay his legal bills. Do you think Andrew could get his old job back?” Not that he likely made much more than Sunny.

“Andrew hasn’t worked in...a while,” she says.

“How long?” I ask, not wanting to hear the answer.

She does a mental calculation, then says, “A few years.”

I shut my eyes. “God, Sun, what do you see in him, anyway?”

She smiles a bittersweet smile. “He’s a good guy, Floe. Sorry we’re both losers in the financial department. But I’ll think of something. No way you’re going public. I won’t let you. People will stone you in the streets--they’ll think you’re some kind of zombie!”

I shrug. “Well, I am. Anyway, I owe it to Dr. Dixon. People think his ideas don’t work, and I’m proof that they do. How do you think I feel about him keeping quiet and losing everything because of me?”

“Floe, I agree it would be terrible if he couldn’t bring back Mom and Dad, or the rest of his clients,” Sunny says. Calmly. I realize the possibility of losing the ‘rents is easier for her to deal with cuz she’s already lived without them for ten years. “But you’re not responsible for him. You didn’t *ask* to come back.”

I smile slightly. “Is that like, ‘I didn’t ask to be born?’” That was a constant refrain with her when she was a kid.

She smiles back. “Something like that.”

I turn sober. “I know what could happen, Sunny. And trust me, I don’t want it to. I was poked and prodded enough when I got lymposis. That much I remember.”

“Exactly,” Sunny says. “And Dixon doesn’t *want* you to go public. It’s his call as much as yours—maybe even more so.”

“You’re right,” I admit, sighing. “So what now?”

-5-

IT'S the morning of the CHS hoverblading field trip. I've been practicing like a crazy person. I can only pray something clicks, and I finally figure out how to fly.

I tell myself not to worry, that surely not all the Cactus Hill students know how to hoverblade.

They do.

Within about ten minutes of our arrival at the Cactus Hill Hoverblading arena, everybody's in the air except me.

I take a few moments to breathe and try and center myself. (It's a Venice thing.) Then I give it a whirl.

And I fall on my rear.

"You okay, Floe?" Haley asks.

I quickly scramble up. "Fine. Just a blip."

"Uh-huh," Ashleigh says, rolling her eyes. "Thought you Venice types were all about the blading."

"Yeah, what's up with that?" Haley asks, staying with me when Ashleigh flies off again. "I was sure you'd be an expert."

I sigh. "Is there a snack bar or something in here?"

"Yeah. Want to get something?"

Not really. I just want to get off the hoverblading floor. "Yeah," I say.

We've only just arrived, so there's nobody else at the snack area yet. They're all still showing off.

“So, you don’t know how to hoverblade?” Haley asks once we sit down with chips.

“Nope,” I say.

“That’s so weird,” she says.

I glare at her. “People have all kinds of interests, Haley. I know at this school everyone is required to be exactly the same, but it’s no crime not to have learned how to hoverblade.”

She holds up a hand. “Sorry, didn’t mean anything by it.”

Oh, crap. Now I’ve made her feel lousy. I really should try not to alienate my one friend at Cactus Hill. “Sorry,” I say. “Sore spot.”

She grins. “I can see that. So what are your interests?”

“What?”

“You said people have all kinds of interests. What are yours?”

Good thing I actually do have some other interests. “Art, mostly,” I say. “Music, but I don’t play any instruments.”

“That’s cool,” she says. “I’m not that great a hoverblader myself. It’s sort of hit and miss with me.”

I smile. “Thanks,” I say.

She shrugs.

We look over at the hoverbladers for a minute.

“Any tips?” I ask.

“Not really. Practice.” She grins. “So are you any good?”

I’m confused. “You know I’m not.”

“I mean at art.” She pulls her all-in-one and a stylus out of her purse, and shoves them in my direction. “Draw something.”

“Uh, okay.”

I look over at Ashleigh and quickly sketch out a cartoon-y thing, with Ashleigh as Harley Quinn.

And when I look up, Ashleigh’s in front of us.

“What’s that?” she asks, her eyes narrowing.

“Nothing,” I say. “Playing Hangman.”

“Yeah, sure,” Ashleigh says, whipping a manicured claw behind me with lightning speed, and grabbing the pad before I can stop her.

I can almost see the steam coming out of her ears.

THE next day, her wannabees engage in a full-blown harassment campaign. Of course, Ashleigh doesn’t actually participate. Heaven forbid she’s actually caught doing something wrong and punished. Oh, no. She’s much too wily for that. Much too much like her dad the politician.

Over the course of the day, Michelle Margolis and Didi Tompkins take it upon themselves to:

-‘bump’ into me several gazillion times in the hallway

-trip me a gazillion times in the same hallway

-‘accidentally’ spill colored water, vinegar, and baking soda all over me in

Chemistry

- point and laugh loudly at me in the caf at lunch

- generally give the entire CHH population the impression that coming within ten feet of me is akin to contracting an STD

Even more depressing, I actually find myself wanting to go back home to the space ship.

But I figure it's probably better to visit Congressman Jones and petition him on the Center's behalf before he finds out about my little drawing of his daughter. So I find out where his constituency office is (in a nearby strip mall) and go straight there after school.

I've been thinking about visiting him for a while, I just needed a little motivation. I'm scared out of my mind, but at least I'm finally doing something concrete about saving the Center, and by extension, my parents.

Not that Dick Jones is actually going to listen to a teen under voting age.

To my surprise, he's actually there (I realize I was sort of hoping he wouldn't be), and as a bonus, so are the Smiths.

The constituency office is a big room with a bunch of desks—at which are sitting a bunch of young politicians answering phones, which are ringing non-stop.

There's a glass-walled office at the back, which is where, I presume, Jones is holed up most of the time. That is, when he's not out halting important scientific progress. But now, he and the Smiths are standing at a desk near the front of the room. They appear to be winding up a discussion.

Hello," he says when he sees me. He looks like a snake, I think—slim, with beady eyes. He's wearing a mix of an old-fashioned blazer over a modern-day unitard. Clearly, he doesn't want to alienate his elderly constituents, but he wants to make his younger ones feel he knows what's about. "I'll be right with you."

The Smiths, in contrast to Jones, are old and tired looking, dressed in drab garb that doesn't attempt any nod to current fashion.

Jones starts to say goodbye to the Smiths, but I say, "No--they can stay."

They all look at me, puzzled, and I say weakly, "It's about the Cryonics Center."

I realize just then that I haven't exactly thought this out. I have no idea what I'm going to say to Jones, or to the Smiths.

"Uh, okay," he says, glancing at them. Mr. Smith shrugs. Jones looks at me, but doesn't ask me to sit, even though there are three chairs in front of the desk they're standing beside, and one behind, for him. Obviously, he doesn't plan to talk to me long. (I'm not voting age, remember?)

When I move closer, he smiles that smarmy smile of his. (I fully expect a forked tongue to dart out.) "Now, what can I do for you? You said this is something about the Cryonics Center?"

"Uh, yeah." Stalling, I ask, "Why are you so involved with that, anyway, if it's not even in your constituency?"

Still smiling, he narrows his beady eyes. "The Smiths live in my district, and I take care of my constituents."

Hmmm. I don't think so. The real reason is that you have ambitions that go beyond Cactus Hill, and this is a great way of getting your name out there. Cryonics is one of those hot-button issues that gets people all hot and bothered--and tons of press coverage.

"I'm, uh, one of your constituents, too," I say, and then I turn to the Smiths. "No disrespect intended, but I know Abe and Beatrice Dixon, and I know they really believe

in what they do, and they're excellent scientists, excellent doctors. They're definitely not scam artists or anything."

I think that sounded pretty convincing.

Jones smiles patronizingly. Guess he's not convinced. "I'm sure they're perfectly nice, er, what was your name?"

I hesitate for a split second. What if he *does* have me investigated? Then I tell myself to stop being an idiot. I'm not about to let Ashleigh Jones *or* her smarmy father intimidate me. "Floe. Floe Ryan."

He bestows an even creepier smile on me. "Well, Floe, as I said, I'm sure they're perfectly nice, and I'm sure they mean well, too. It's just that cryonics is a kind of freakish, fantasy science, and it doesn't really matter what they believe. You can't freeze people—"

"They don't freeze them," I say.

"What?" he asks.

"They don't freeze them. They vitrify them. Freezing causes cells to expand and explode. The bodies are put in a big vat of liquid nitrogen and some newer, artificially created chemicals."

"Right." He smiles. "What school do you go to, Floe?"

"Cactus Hill Secondary School, sir."

He looks at me. "Really? What year are you in?"

"I'm in eleventh grade," I mumble.

He leans back against the desk and crosses his arms. "Ah, then you know my daughter Ashleigh."

That's exactly what I was afraid he was going to say.

All too well, I think. “Yes sir, I do,” I say.

He smiles again. “Well, you sound like an excellent science student, Floe.”

He seems to expect a response, so I say, “Not really, sir.” *It’s just that you’re an idiot and haven’t even bothered to try and find out what they’re actually doing over there at the Venice Cryonics Center.*

“The fact of the matter is, Floe, you can’t freeze—or nitrify—“

“Vitrify,” I correct him.

Now he’s starting to look a little angry. “Vitrify people, and bring them back from the dead, and it’s wrong to make people think you can.”

“But how are we ever going to know if it works if people aren’t allowed to figure it out?”

“I don’t think people should be allowed to figure it out. The dead should be able to rest in peace. Their bodies should be treated with dignity.”

“But they are treated with dignity...” I trail off, realizing I can’t very well tell him that the Dixons don’t allow anyone besides themselves into the vat room. How would I explain knowing this? Dixon hasn’t made his policies public.

Jones laughs. “You call plunging dead bodies into vats full of chemicals so they can float there for God only knows how long dignified?”

“No offense, sir, but I think if given the choice, most people would allow their bodies to be plunged into a vat of chemicals, as you put it, if it meant they could come back to life.”

He cocks an eyebrow. “And when do you think they’ll come back to life? In fifty years? One-hundred? Who would want to come back to life in a completely different world with no friends or family members around?”

I'm thrown for a minute. Some people *will* have to wait hundreds of years for their cures. It's been hard for me just ten years after I was vitrified. Would I really want to come back a hundred years after being frozen? I'm not sure.

But I *am* sure other people would.

"Just because *you* wouldn't want to doesn't mean others wouldn't," I say. "What gives you the right to make that decision for everyone?"

"The fact that I was elected." He says this easily, but I can see his jaw working. He's definitely had enough of me.

I turn to the Smiths. They don't look like bad people. Like I said, they just look tired. Very tired.

"How long has your mother been there?" I ask Mr. Smith.

"Twenty years," he says.

I can't even blame them for what they're doing. They've already waited twenty years.

"Excuse me for asking, but—what did she die of?"

"Cancer," Mrs. Smith says. "Lung cancer."

My heart sinks. They may be waiting another twenty years. Cancer's still the big scientific bugaboo. Nobody can figure out how to cure it.

Nope, I can't blame the Smiths for what they're doing one little bit.

Unfortunately, what they're doing affects so many more people than they know.

And I can't even tell them how.

"Is that all you wanted to say, Floe?" Jones says to me in the way he would speak to a fourth-grader.

No! I was vitrified and brought back from the dead! I want to shout.

But I can't.

I can't go public before Dixon wants me to—for his sake and mine.

“Yeah. I'll walk myself out,” I mutter.

He nods and says, “Keep up your good school work, Floe. You're the future.”

Hopefully me, and not your daughter, I think as I turn around and start trudging toward the door.

“I'm going to talk to Ashleigh,” he calls. “Maybe she'll invite you over for dinner one night.”

I almost laugh out loud.

Instead, I turn around and say, “Oh, she's pretty busy, what with all her Smashball practices and such.”

He looks at me as if trying to decide whether or not I'm being sarcastic.

Then he smiles one of his snake-like specials. “You take care now, Floe.”

Great. That's definitely code for *Watch it*.

Now I have two enemies with the last name of Jones.

-6-

IT'S Valentine's Day.

Needless to say, I don't have a Valentine.

But believe it or not, I'm kind of looking forward to the Valentine's Day dance at Cactus Hill High. I'm a pretty good dancer. Who knows? Maybe my dancing will wow the student body so much, they'll banish Ashleigh Jones and anoint *me* queen of the school!

Okay, not so realistic. But I might impress them. And I desperately want to impress them after the hoverblading fiasco. I know, I'm not that into the whole popularity contest thing. But it *would* be nice to feel a little less like a social outcast.

The gym looks fab—a lot less sterile than usual, with red ribbons and balloons all over the place. It's still no Venice Alternative, but even I have to admit it actually looks nice.

I head for the punch bowl, and—too late—see Jones standing in front of it. Crap. He must be chaperoning.

When he sees me, his smile turns into something really creepy. Not that I think he perceives me as a huge threat or anything. His smile is just naturally creepy.

“Good evening, Floe.”

Clearing my throat, I say, “Congressman Jones. How nice to see you here.”

He smiles.

I smile back and try to send him a telepathic message to head back to the punch table, to no avail.

“So,” I ask casually, “how are the Smiths holding up?”

“They’re doing as well as they can. All they want is a dignified burial for their poor mother.”

“Don’t her own wishes count for anything?” I hear myself saying.

“Well, of course they do, Floe, but you know, sometimes elderly people don’t make the best decisions.”

“I didn’t get the impression she was mentally incapacitated when she made her wishes known.”

Jones folds his arms. “Well, yes, but fear can do strange things to people.”

“It sure can,” I say pointedly. “Especially fear of scientific progress, of the unknown.”

He laughs. “You think that’s why I’m against cryonics? Fear of scientific progress? There’s no scientific progress to be made there, Floe. It’s junk science.”

How the heck would you know? I want to scream.

I try another tack. “So you think the state should decide what’s proper science, proper progress?”

“Well, of course. That’s why we elect officials—to represent our collective wishes.”

“And at this time, that would be your party--the one led by all the TV and movie stars.”

Jones smiles. “Many of our most effective elected officials have been entertainers.”

I give a short laugh. “Yeah, right.”

“Well,” he says, “we’ll have to agree to disagree there. It’s been pleasant chatting with you, Floe.” His tone says otherwise.

“Ditto,” I say. *Not.*

I let out a huge breath when he walks away.

I look around. Strangely, no one’s dancing. I’m not about to *start* the dancing—even I’m not into social suicide—so I’m relieved and secretly pleased when Ashleigh (inexplicably) grabs me by the arm and says, “C’mon, newbie, let’s get this party started.”

I order myself to forget about Ashleigh’s dad, who seems to have stepped outside, and do what I came here to do—have a good time and make new friends.

I’m looking pretty good tonight. I’ve mixed it up, accessorizing a red unitard with vintage white go-go boots. I get admiring looks from both girls and guys as I head to the middle of the dance floor.

I close my eyes to the wordless electronic techno-pop the deejay’s playing, trying to really feel it.

When the song’s over and I open my eyes, I see everybody crowding around.

Staring.

Nobody’s joined in.

Nobody’s applauding me or telling me how great I was.

Instead, there’s a lot of tittering and eye-rolling. Ashleigh and her followers—all in sleek white unitards—are giggling.

Like a fool, I fell for a setup.

“Interesting,” Haley mutters, appearing out of nowhere, grabbing my arm and leading me out of the gym, into the hallway. “Exactly what were you hoping to accomplish with that display?”

I sigh. “Popularity. Adoration. Admiration, at the very least. But I probably wouldn’t have danced at all if Ashleigh hadn’t dragged me out there.”

Haley stares. “You fell for a *setup*?”

“Even cynics are occasionally optimistic about human nature. Dumb, I know.”

THANK goodness Ashleigh’s away from school for a few days after that—some kind of cold or flu, Haley says. And Ash’s minions don’t do anything without direct orders. In the meantime, Haley hangs with me and it’s nice.

One night, she persuades me to go shopping for unitards and crystal jewelry at the mall.

“Hi, Dad,” she says to a middle-aged guy with a nice smile when we’re inside The Crystal Palace.

“Oh, hey, Haley,” he says, smiling. “Just checking up on my favorite location.” He looks at me and smiles. “Who’s this?”

“Floe, my dad. Dad, Floe. She’s new at Cactus Hill.”

“Nice to meet you, Floe,” he says.

“Same here,” I say, kind of shocked. Haley never told me her father owned The Crystal Palace. It’s a huge chain.

“I’m gonna deck her out,” Haley explains, leading me over to the necklace counter.

“This is your dad’s store?” I whisper incredulously.

“Yup,” Haley says nonchalantly.

“Not just this one—the whole chain?”

“Yup,” she says again.

“Wow,” I murmur.

She grins. “Get over it. It’s just the family business. Well, what do you think?” she says once we’ve looked at the display for a few secs.

“They’re gorgeous, but I’m not much of a necklace person,” I say. “Any bracelets?”

She frowns. “Not many. Guess a string of crystals would be kind of uncomfortable.”

“Not if you glued them onto a strip of leather—“

The idea hits me so fast it almost hurts.

It’s perfect.

And Haley can help me.

But first I have to tell her.

Everything.

“Haley, is there an office or something in here where we could talk privately?” I say urgently.

She looks at me the way she looked at me that fist day.

“Uh, yeah, at the back. Why?”

I drag her by the elbow. “I need to tell you something.”

“Um, okay,” she says. “Floe, let up, you’re hurting me!”

I see the office and grab the knob. The door’s unlocked. I shove her in.

She rubs her arm as she lowers herself onto a chair.

“Sorry,” I say apologetically.

“You’d better be! What’s so important?”

I don’t sit. I pace.

Taking a deep breath, I swallow and say, “I was—frozen. For ten years. I was just revived and cured.”

She stares. “Say what?”

I stop pacing and look at her. The words come tumbling out. I tell her everything—about the Dixons, my parents, Sunny. What I have to do.

When I’m done, all she says is “Wow.” Her eyes are wide.

“You believe me, right?” I ask anxiously.

She shakes her head. “It’s hard to believe, but yeah, I do.” She pauses. “So you’re really...twenty-six?”

I really wish I could get this age thing straight. Sighing, I say, “Well, it’s complicated. Because I was preserved, I haven’t really aged. I was born twenty-six years ago, but yeah, physically, mentally and emotionally, I’m still sixteen.”

“Wow,” Haley says again, her eyes even wider.

“I know it’s mind-blowing.” I suddenly realize she may never want to have anything to do with me ever again, never mind help me with a major scheme to help the Cryonics Center. “I understand if you don’t want anything to do with me. I’m sorry I lied to you.”

She looks at me sharply. “Hey, don’t lump me in with Ashleigh and those guys. The person it’s most mind-blowing for is you.” She shakes her head again. “God, these past couple of months must have been really rough on you.”

“Yeah.” I glance down. I don’t know what else to say.

She gives me a hug, and when she pulls away, she says, “So why did you decide to tell me now?”

Taking a deep breath, I present my money-making idea: imprinting leather bracelets like the kind that were popular when I lived in Venice. But with ice-like crystals pasted on this time around. And fun messages about saving the Cryonics Center.

When I’m done, she nods slowly and says, “I can see those selling big.”

“Great slogans will be key.”

“You’re so creative. I’m sure you’ll come up with killer ones. Let’s tell Dad—“

I grab her arm when she gets up. “We can’t tell him I’m—“

She rolls her eyes. “I’m not stupid. Course not. I’m just gonna tell him it’ll be a cool—haha--thing to sell. C’mon.”

And with that, she drags me over to her dad to tell him about the idea that might save the Venice Cryonics Center. Not to mention my sister’s butt. And make him some money in the bargain...

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“I can’t believe you’d do this for me,” Abe says on the phone that night. I finally managed to reach him. He sounds old and tired.

I try to keep my tone light. “It’s not just for you. It’s for me. I want my parents back so I can get away from Sunny.”

“Floe, I can’t promise anything. Even if you make a whole lot of money, it doesn’t guarantee I’ll be able to keep the Center open. A judge may still rule in favor of the Smiths.”

“But if people end up loving the bracelets and there’s this whole groundswell of support, who knows? Maybe the Smiths will drop the suit.” I’m forcing the optimism here. It’s not a natural state.

“Maybe,” Abe says. He sounds like he believes it about as much as I do, which is not so much. We both know Jones isn’t going to back down, risk losing face. And he seems to be running the show where the Smiths are concerned.

“So how are you doing, Floe? I’m sorry I haven’t been able to spend any time with you.” He sighs. “This isn’t what I intended.”

And even though I *have* been ticked off about the whole situation, I can’t help but feel bad for him. He did—and is doing—the best he can. “It’s okay, Doc. I’m doing okay.”

Actually, I realize, I am.

“How are *you* holding up?” I ask.

“Oh, I’m tough. So is Bea,” he says.

We chat some more, and I hang up to find Andrew standing at the kitchen doorway.

“Dixon?” he asks.

“Yeah,” I say, starting to walk out. “Gotta go upstairs, do some homework.”

“Floe, wait,” he says. “I think we need to talk.”

Uh-oh.

“Talk?” I try frantically to think of a way out.

“Well, yeah. We got off on the wrong foot.”

Because you talked my sister into stealing from our parents, I think.

“Uh, okay,” I say, walking back over to the chair I just got up from.

He sits down opposite me.

“So.” He looks at me intently. “How are you doing?”

“Uh, Andrew, you haven’t been reading one of those *How to Deal With Your Teenager* books, have you?”

He smiles. “No. I’ve been watching Dr. Syl.”

Dr. Syl is the advice guru of the day, specializing in family relations. She’s terrifyingly strict and bizarrely insulting for a person in her field. This can’t be good.

But Andrew laughs. “Don’t worry. I’m not a big fan.”

Phew, I think.

“So, what’s up?” I say, curious.

“I just wanted to clarify something.”

“What?”

“You think I married your sister for money.”

“No, I don’t.” *Yes, I do.*

“The thing is, I didn’t even know about the situation with your parents until long after Sunny and I were married.”

“Really?” I say. Wow, this *is* news. “So when you got married...”

“We were both flat broke, and totally in love. I think by that time in her life, Sunny had given up on her dreams. I wanted to give her what she wanted. Believe it or not, Floe, all this doesn’t mean crap to me. It’s important to her, though, so I thought of a way she could make it happen.”

It kind of stuns me that I’d never considered that possibility before—that Andrew loved Sunny so much, he just wanted to find a way to give her what she wanted.

“So...you really love her?” I ask.

“Yeah, I do,” he says.

Just then, Sunny comes in from putting Jake down. “What’s going on?” she asks suspiciously.

“Nothing,” I say. “We were just talking.”

“Talking? What do you two have to talk about?”

“He’s been watching Dr. Syl,” I say.

Sunny rolls her eyes. “That witch?”

Another shock. “You don’t like Dr. Syl?” I say.

Sunny folds her arms. “I know that must come as a great surprise to you, but no, I think she’s a psycho herself.”

Andrew says, “Scuse me, ladies, I have to go. I have a lot of studying to do.”

“Studying?” I ask.

“Two job interviews next week,” he says. “Didn’t Sunny tell you?”

I look at Sunny, who’s beaming proudly. “No, she didn’t.”

“I wanted it to be a surprise, lambkins,” Sunny says.

“Aw, sorry, hon. I blew it.”

“Dealerships?” I ask.

“Yeah.” He winks at me. “I’ve been coasting for a while, but it’s time to get my butt in gear again.”

“That’s great, Andrew,” I say, meaning it. “I hope you get one of them.”

I watch him go, then say to Sunny, “That’s a pretty good guy you’ve got there. Why didn’t you tell me?”

She stares after him. “What did he say?”

“That he wanted to use the money to make you happy.” I don’t have to ask if it’s true.

She runs a hand through her hair and sighs. “I felt lousy about doing it. Is that so hard to believe?”

“No,” I say softly. “It isn’t. And for the record, I think you’re a pretty good sister, too.”

She laughs shortly. “How’s that? I’ve made such a mess of things. And I’ve been horrible to you.”

“That’s totally not true.” Well, okay, it’s partly true. “How could anyone be expected to adjust gracefully to this situation? You did the best you could.” Another epiphany. “And I understand how you couldn’t resist the money. God, Sunny, how do you think *I* feel about what happened to you? Your whole childhood was taken away from you because of me and mom and dad.”

She comes over and hugs me. “That’s all in the past, hon. You’re here, and I have Andrew and Jake.”

“And you’ll have mom and dad soon.”

She looks at me and smiles. “Hopefully.”

I can tell she doesn’t believe it.

“You didn’t think *I* was coming back.”

“True,” she acknowledges.

“They’re coming back,” I say firmly.

“As a result of your bracelet project.”

I can’t get mad at her for not believing. She had her whole family die on her.

“What, you think Andrew’s job at the used car lot’s more likely to save us?”

Now she laughs. “No. Nor the minimum wage job I’m gonna take at the Bra Boutique at the mall.”

“Come again?” I say.

“Yeah, I’ve been thinking about it.” She shrugs. “It’s not a big moneymaker, but the truth is, I’m insanely bored. I can take Jake over to my rich friend Marissa’s house—she’s already offered. She’s bored, too.”

“That’s great, Sun,” I say, meaning it.

She smiles and rubs my arm. “Thanks. Want some chocolate chip cookies and milk?”

Chocolate chip cookies and milk actually sound pretty great right about now.

“Sure,” I say, thinking, for the first time, *If the bracelet thing doesn’t work and the Cryonics Center closes, this might just end up being okay...*

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BUT the bracelet thing *does* end up working. Big time. Though I'm not exactly sure how big, as I haven't gotten my share of the profits yet. Haley's dad found sub-contractors to quickly produce my designs and put them at the front of all his Crystal Hut stores. They were an instant, huge hit, and today, we're being interviewed by the latest ZTV deejay. When I see everybody in the studio audience waving their bracelets, I'm hopeful that when the time finally does come to go public, we frozen zombies will be accepted wholeheartedly. (Okay, so I'm dreaming. They may accept theoretical freaks. Flesh and blood freaks are a completely different story.)

It doesn't take us long to come off our high. Outside the ZTV studio, we're met by none other than Congressman Dick Jones, semi-disguised in a hat and glasses.

I look at Haley, who's gone white.

Until this moment, I hadn't realized what a big deal it was for her to have done what she did for me. She is (was?) Ashleigh Jones' best friend, and Ashleigh Jones' father has been campaigning against our cause.

He must be furious.

I kind of miss it when Jones moves up to her swiftly, practically pushing his face right into hers and says, "Haley, this girl is dangerous. Don't align yourself with her."

I suddenly snap to, and see the fear in Haley's face—fear she's valiantly trying to hide.

"Congressman Jones," I interrupt firmly, stepping up to them, "I—"

Haley puts her hand on my shoulder and shakes her head. “It’s okay, Floe.” She looks straight at Jones. “You’re wrong.”

“I treated you like a daughter, Haley,” he says menacingly. “You’ll pay for this.” (I swear, he really says this.)

“You okay?” I ask Haley in the cab on the way home.

“Yeah,” she whispers.

I could kill Jones for making her miserable when she should be totally happy.

“Don’t you spend another minute worrying about that bag of wind,” I command her. I put my arm around her. “You were really brave back there,” I murmur.

She smiles weakly. “Thanks. That—wasn’t fun.”

“God,” I say, “I’m such an idiot. I never even thought about how what a horrible position doing this put you in. You’re Ashleigh’s best friend!”

“I *was* Ashleigh’s best friend.”

We’re all silent for a minute.

“What a ride it’s all been,” I say after a minute. “I tell ya, nothing will ever surprise me again.”

But then something does. We go into my house and Sunny tells me my share of the profits on the bracelets has been deposited into my bank account.

Haley and I look at each other. “Guess mine’s there too,” she says, whipping out her all-in-one.

“Well?” Sunny says. “Don’t you want to know how much you made?”

“Maybe I don’t. What if it’s not as much as I think?” I ask.

Haley rolls her eyes. “Floe, do you think we would have gotten booked on *ZTV* if the bracelets weren’t absolutely huge?”

I take out my all-in-one and we both look at our accounts at the same time.

Haley's eyes turn round as saucers. "Holy hoverblades!"

THE next day, I go to the Center to present the Dixons with their share of the spoils. The reporters have thinned out. A lot of the opposition to the Center—as we predicted—has gone down since the bracelet launch.

Except, according to Abe, opposition from the Smiths.

Which means, even with all the money I've given the Dixons to keep the Center open, they may not be able to. They may be forced to close it, if that's what the judge decides. Court proceedings are due to begin in a few weeks.

"I can't believe they're not dropping the suit," I say, stunned.

Abe shrugs. "I didn't expect them to. Jones hasn't changed his tune."

"Tell me about it," I say. I give him the rundown on what happened outside the ZTV studio.

Bea exclaims, "Why, that awful man!"

Abe shakes his head. "He definitely shouldn't have tried to intimidate you kids, but he just thinks he's right. It's hard to convince most people. In some cases, nothing short of losing their own loved ones will make them see the light. And sometimes not even that." He looks down at the check. "This is truly remarkable," he adds solemnly, "especially since we've failed you both so miserably. I'm truly sorry we weren't able to give both of you more support."

"Hey," I say, "earning that money wasn't half as hard as learning to hoverblade."

Abe shakes his head. "Don't be so modest. Learning how to deal with a whole new world and making all this money would have been huge accomplishments all by

themselves. But on top of that, you've overcome a huge number of social challenges these past few months: a move, a new school, and a new guardian...your younger sister, who's now your older sister."

He's right, I think, surprised.

But then I get home and get a phone call from a tearful Haley telling me Ashleigh's illness has worsened considerably, and has finally been diagnosed as, not pneumonia at all, but a new strain of lymphoma for which there's no cure...

And I wonder if I have it in me to face my next, most impossible challenge...

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I take a cab to Jones' house. (There's a distinct advantage to having money.)

Can I really go forward with my plan? Telling Jones the truth about myself?

What if he exposes me? Makes my life a living nightmare?

I decide not to think about the repercussions. I take a deep breath and press the buzzer.

Jones, looking haggard, opens the door.

"Mr. Jones, I have to talk—"

"I have nothing to say to you," he says shortly.

"I just want to—"

"Go home, Floe," he says angrily.

I say it in a rush. "I was frozen and Dixon brought me back to life. He didn't want to tell anybody. I can help you save Ashleigh."

He stares at me. "You're crazy."

"I know it sounds crazy, but it's true. That's why the whole lawsuit thing sent me up the wall. I know cryonics works, I just couldn't tell anybody! It's why I created the bracelets. I'm waiting for Dixon to give me back my parents! I'm helping him pay his legal bills!"

He shakes his head. "I don't believe you," he says tiredly. "You need medical help, Floe. A psychiatrist or something." And with that, he practically slams the door in my face.

“Check me out,” I yell before the door slams shut. “See when I was born. I’m twenty-six!”

The door stops.

It doesn’t open again right away. But it does open again—after what seems like an hour but is only about a minute.

“You know I wouldn’t lie about this. You could easily find out the truth. All you have to do is dig into my records.” I whip my all-in-one out of my bag. “Here. Search my mother. Susan Ryan. She was—is--a well-known artist. There are photos of our whole family in dated newspaper articles.”

He looks at me, and, after a moment, takes the all-in-one and clicks it on. After a few moments, he whispers, “You’re...twenty-six.”

“Well, because of the cryopreservation process, I look—and feel—sixteen. Which is how old I was ten years ago.”

Another endless pause.

He reaches out a hand to touch my cheek.

I force myself not to leap back. I guess this is how pregnant people feel when strangers touch their tummies without asking. (Mental note: ask Sunny if this ever happened to her. Possible experience to bond over.)

“Your skin’s so soft,” he murmurs.

“It’s the chemicals,” I explain. “It’s like having a full body peel.”

“A full body peel,” he says hollowly. “What’s that?”

“Not important,” I say. I tell myself to be patient. He’s getting distracted by stupid stuff because the big stuff is so hard to take in. Totally understandable.

“What...happened?” he asks finally.

I look around nervously. “Uh, do you think I could come in? It’s probably not the best idea to talk about this outside. Anyone could hear.”

“Right,” he says. He’s not being scary anymore. Well, he’s being scary in another way. He seems to be in a sort of trance-like state. He was keeping it together until I came along. Clearly, the whole frozen thing pushed him over the edge.

I have to get him back so he’ll agree to freeze Ashleigh.

“Come in,” he adds.

I follow him to the ultra modern, ultra expensive looking, living room. He sits in a plastic chair. I sit on a black leather couch opposite him.

“Is your wife here?” I ask hesitantly, figuring she should probably be in on this conversation, too.

“She’s upstairs lying down. I don’t want to disturb her.”

“Oh. Uh, okay.” I clear my throat. “Do you have any other questions?”

“What have you told people you knew from back then?”

“Truthfully, sir, I haven’t run into that many. Those I have, I’ve just told I was sick this whole time.”

He nods and smiles wanly. “Some people will believe anything,” he says. “I’m a politician. I know.”

I smile back.

“My daughter mentioned that you were...odd. That you didn’t know how to do things other people knew how to do.”

“Guess she told you about the dance, and the hoverblading field trip.”

“Yes,” he says. “We’re actually quite close.”

“A lot’s happened in ten years,” I explain.

“It must be—amazing.”

“That’s one word for it,” I say. “It’s tough when you’ve been out of commission for so long.” I think about adding, “Ashleigh won’t have that problem,” but I decide not to. He’s not ready to talk about Ashleigh being dead and frozen yet.

“You’d think they would catch on after a while,” he says.

“Well, like you said, some people will believe anything.”

“Even when the truth is staring them in the face,” he murmurs.

Okay, maybe he is ready. “Sir,” I say slowly and clearly, “if Ashleigh passes, you can’t plan a funeral if you think you might want to bring her back. Do you understand?”

He looks at me for a long time, and then nods. “I understand.”

“So you think you...might want to bring her back?”

Again with the long look. “I’ll think about it,” he says finally.

I guess it’s the best I can do. I stand. “Please do. And let Dr. Dixon know what you’ve decided as soon as possible. Please give my regards to your wife.”

“The door’s over there,” he murmurs. “You can show yourself out.”

I stand and look at him, not trusting him at all to make the right decision in the state he’s in.

But I can’t do any more.

Slowly, I walk to the door.

THE next morning, Abe calls. “You told Jones,” he says sternly.

Oh, crap. “I’m so sorry, Abe. I thought he might decide to freeze Ashleigh if she dies, and then he’d convince the Smiths to drop their suit.”

There’s a pause. And then, happily: “Well, he did decide to freeze Ashleigh.”

Whaat!

“You’re kidding! That’s amazing!” I clear my throat. “Well, of course, it’s not amazing that she’s dying.”

“No, not at all,” he says soberly. “Bea’s close to getting the cure for this particular strain of lymposis approved, but there’s no guarantee. Also, you were pronounced dead before you were dead by today’s standards. These days, people are pronounced dead until they’re good and dead, making revival difficult.”

I have no response.

“She’s about to go, Floe.”

“Good luck,” I say after a moment.

“Thanks. We’ll need it.”

An hour later, I get the news that Ashleigh’s passed on.

I immediately call Haley to tell her.

“Wow,” she whispers.

“You know you can’t tell anybody this, right?” I say anxiously.

“What do you think?” she says huffily. “I have had experience keeping this kind of secret, you know.”

“Oh, God, I’m sorry, Haley. It’s just that so much is riding on this.”

“I know,” she says softly. “I hope it works out. For everybody.” She pauses. “I have to say, if Ash comes back to, it’ll be a little weird for me. My two best friends will be frozen zombies.”

I laugh. “Well, get used to the idea, kiddo. It’s gonna happen. She’s gonna come back.”

At least, I can only hope so.

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A week later, Bea has her approval.

It's time to de-vitrify, revive and cure Ashleigh.

Haley and I are waiting outside the de-vitrification/revival room. Ashleigh's parents are waiting in an inner room, just off the revival arena.

We're all pacing.

"This isn't doing us any good," I announce at one point. "Let's just sit down."

"Too jittery," Haley says.

"Well, let's at least talk about something while we're pacing."

"How 'bout we talk about how *I'm* gonna be the outcast soon." Haley's back to pacing. "In a few months, I might be the only non-freak at Cactus Hill!"

"From your lips to god's ears."

"What do you think it'll be like?" she asks. "When more people have been thawed and word is out. Will the normals bully the frozen zombies, you think?"

"Not if Ashleigh Jones is one of the frozen zombies." I grin.

"And what happens to kids at schools where there's no Ashleigh?" Haley asks.

"Haley, we're just taking it one day at a time here," I say.

She nods. "Yeah, I get it. Sorry."

I nod back even though I'm silently cursing her. Now I'm not going to be able to stop thinking about a paranormal TV show type future.

I shake my head. What am I, crazy? Life isn't a TV show.

But when we hear a whole lot of beeping and running and clanging of metal carts, it sure sounds like a medical one...

WE rush out into the hall just as Bea's coming out of the de-vitrification area.

"Bea, what happened? What's going on?"

She shakes her head. "We couldn't revive her. I'm sorry."

"But you have the cure!" Haley cries.

"It's not the cure that's the problem," I say.

"Then what's the problem? I don't understand!"

"It's revival, in Ashleigh's case," I explain gently.

"But they revived you!"

"By today's standards, I wasn't really dead. I was pronounced dead only a few minutes after my heart stopped. But by today's standards, Ashleigh really is dead."

"So there's no hope?"

Bea looks at us, as if debating whether or not to tell us something. "There is one thing we can try. We've re-vitrified her. Did it as soon as we realized the revival process wasn't going to work, before her brain began to deteriorate. If Congressman Jones agrees, we can try it in a few days with a newer instrument for revival."

"He'll never go for it." I shake my head. "This was a one-time chance. He's probably more anti-cryonics now than ever. But just out of curiosity, what is it you want to try?"

"It's a kind of super-strength defibrillator Abe's been working on."

"Untested?" I ask.

"Yes."

“Like I said, Jones’ll never go for it.”

“Floe, you can talk him into it,” Haley says wildly. “I know you can! We have to convince him to try again before he plans her funeral!”

I shake my head. “He already thinks we’re a bunch of crazies. We failed to bring her back, and now we want to try an untested, super-strength defibrillator on her? He’ll never go for it.”

“Abe’s talking to him now,” Bea says quietly. “You kids have done enough. Why don’t you go on home?”

Haley sighs. “My parents said to call them when we wanted to be picked up.” She told them she had some bracelet-associated business at the Center. “Floe, you need a lift back, right?”

“Nah, I guess I’ll stick around.

She nods, hugs me, and heads down the hallway.

Just when Jones comes back. When he sees me, he just turns away, doesn’t even acknowledge me.

“Mr. Jones—wait!” I shout.

He keeps walking, and guiding his wife swiftly away from us.

I catch up to them. “I just wanted to let you know how sorry I am things didn’t go as planned.”

“Thank you,” he says shortly.

“If I could just have a minute of your time—“

He turns a stone-cold glance on me. “I gave you more than a minute, young lady. I can’t believe it, but I did. And now, the time for talking is past. I’m going to give my daughter a decent, dignified burial.”

“Did Dr. Dixon explain about the defibrillator?” I ask quickly.

He starts to walk away again, but his wife stops him with a hand on his shoulder. Amanda Jones is one of those California socialites who always looks smashing in the gossip columns. Today, she looks like a skeleton. The skin over her bones is pale (very un-Californian), and I’m sure the giant rings under her eyes would horrify her plastic surgeon.

“Yes, he did,” Mrs. Jones says. She looks at me closely. “Are you the one?” she says softly.

“Yes,” I answer, feeling like a bug under a microscope. Is this how *everybody’s* going to look at me one day?

“What’s it like?” she whispers.

Jones seems to shake himself out of a stupor. “Amanda, we are not going any further with this. Our daughter is going to die with dignity.”

“But look at her!” she cries. “She’s alive! She’s more than alive—she’s beautiful!” She reaches up a hand to my cheek. “Your skin’s so smooth,” she says in wonder.

“It’s the chemicals,” I explain. “It’s like having a full-body peel.”

Her face lights up, as I knew it would.

“Amanda, please—“

“No, George,” she says. “How can you not try everything when you know it works?”

“It worked for *them*. It didn’t work for *her*.”

“There’s something else they can try. Don’t we owe it to our daughter to try everything?” She looks at him. “Or are you so heartlessly ambitious, you’ll put your pride before your daughter?”

He sucks in a breath. “How can you say that? I tried it once. Despite my opinions, the people I’ve made promises to.”

“Yes, you did--and now we’re being given yet another chance to save our daughter and you’re digging in your heels.”

I hold my breath, and silently thank Amanda Jones. I’m not even going to add anything. She’s doing just fine.

“All right,” he says tiredly. “You win. We’ll try again.”

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A week after that, we're back at the hospital. When Bea bursts into the waiting room and announces that the de-vitrification, revival and cure administration has all gone smoothly this time, there are huge shouts of glee.

"Can she see us now?" Haley asks eagerly.

"Give her some time," I say. I look at Bea. "She probably hasn't even gotten her drinking muscles back yet."

"Abe's with her," Bea says softly. "In a little while, we'll bring her parents in. You three can see her in a few hours, if you wish."

"Hours!" Haley cries. Then she shrugs. "Wanna hit the strip?"

We're just about to leave when Dick Jones comes into the room.

"Mr. Jones!" Haley exclaims. "How is she?"

He smiles weakly. "She's great." He looks at me. "Thanks to Miss Ryan here."

His expression turns serious. "I don't know how to thank you."

I smile. "I can think of a way."

He nods. "I'll do my best to try and convince the Smiths to drop the lawsuit."

"That's not the only reason I told you my story. I wanted to help Ashleigh."

He looks at me. "Floe, I'm perfectly aware there's no love lost between you and my daughter. But I also know that you're not the manipulative type."

Boy, he really doesn't know me, I think.

"I know you believe in this cause, in saving lives. I was a fool."

“No,” I say. “It’s hard to wrap your mind around if you haven’t had experience with it.”

He laughs. “That’s an understatement.”

“Frankly, I was surprised you made the decision so quickly. Well, not the first time, but the second time.”

“We do all we can for our loved ones. I see that now.” He holds up his wrist, adorned with a crystal-studded bracelet that says, “Frozen and fabulous.”

We all grin.

WHEN we return to the Center a few hours later, I’m called into Ashleigh’s room.

“I hear you’re the one I have to thank for this,” she croaks.

“Don’t talk so much,” I say soothingly, handing her a drink on her bedside table.

“Small sips.”

She takes a small sip and looks at me. “So you died and were brought back too?”

I nod.

“Explains why you’re such a freak,” she mutters.

I laugh. “Only partly.”

She looks at me. “It must have been really hard for you. Ten years.” She shakes her head. “I can’t even imagine.”

I shrug. “It was hard. For a while. It’s not so hard now.”

“What things were new to you?”

“Oh, just about everything—holographic teachers, hoverblading.”

She grins. “I could tell.”

“I was a kickin’ in-line skater in my time. It really bugged me that I couldn’t catch on. But I’ve got it now.”

“Too bad there won’t be another field trip ‘till next year.”

I laugh. “You said it.”

“Guess larking was new to you, too,” she says.

“You guessed right,” I say.

“I’m sorry I gave you such a hard—“ She collapses into a coughing fit.

“Ash, it’s okay. We don’t have to talk about this now—“

“No, we do. You saved my life.”

“And now your dad’s going to help save more lives.”

“Your parents.”

“Among others.”

“So you’ll be leaving Cactus Hill,” she says.

“Probably.”

“Too bad. Things are gonna change around here. You’re looking at a new Ashleigh Jones!”

Uh-oh. I may have created a monster. And I don’t mean just another frozen zombie.

“I’m going to be a better person. I’m going to change the world!”

I have to stop myself from laughing. “That might be a tad too ambitious. Maybe you should start at a community center or something.”

“Ha, thinking small is for small people. Look what you and Haley did, creating and selling those bracelets.”

I smile. “You know what, Ash? You’re right. What we did is amazing, and if you want to do amazing things, you can and you will.”

“Right. Well, plus, I’m a congressman’s daughter.”

Now I do laugh. “Right,” I say when I stop.

Just then, Mr. and Mrs. Jones come into the room.

“Oh, hey, I’ll leave now—“

Mrs. Jones, whose eyes are still watery, grabs my arm and says, “No. Stay. I haven’t thanked you.”

For a skeletal blonde, she has an iron grip. “Really, Mrs. Jones, it’s not necessary. I’ve been thanked so much already.”

She finally loosens her hand, thank God. “Not the way I’m going to thank you. I’m going to throw a party for you!”

“A party,” I say, a little worriedly. “Dr. Dixon explained to you that we have to keep this quiet, right?”

“Not that kind of party.” She smiles. “Just a regular party. Poor dear. You haven’t had your parents around to throw you any shindigs. It’ll just be a small get-together for your friends and family. We’ll call it an end-of-year celebration. Now, let’s figure out what we should do. Let’s see, if you wanted to keep it intimate, with just your girlfriends, we could do a spa party—makeovers, hairdos, that sort of thing. What do you think?”

“Mrs. Jones, I really, really appreciate that, but...”

She looks at me. “Spa parties aren’t your ‘thing’.”

I smile apologetically. “Guess it’s easy to tell, huh?”

“Well, what do you like to do, then?”

“I like to sketch,” I say.

She frowns. “Floe, only little children have art parties. Well, unless we have it at a gallery, make it a cocktail type of thing—without the alcohol, of course.” She turns to Ashleigh. “Do you think that would work, honey?”

Ashleigh rolls her eyes. “Mom, that’s the stupidest thing I’ve ever heard.”

“Well, what kind of party shall it be then?”

I look at Ashleigh. She’s grinning too. “A hoverblading party!” I say.

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“NOT a bad turnout,” Haley comments.

“Yeah, not bad at all,” I say.

I’m feeling pretty festive. Jones managed to persuade the Smiths to drop the lawsuit (without letting on that his own daughter was a frozen zombie), and now it’s full speed ahead! And Abe wants me to be a peer reintegration counselor at the center! And a hoverblading instructor! After hours of practice on my own, I finally figured out the trick—a little double kickback on entry!

“I can tell you’re itching to go,” Haley says. “Let’s do it.”

There are only a few hoverbladers on the floor. The rest are standing around chatting. When I step out, Haley whispers something to the deejay, and he puts a spotlight on me and pumps up the music. Everybody hoots and hollers.

My heart’s beating a hundred miles a minute, but I know I can do it. I’ve done it about a thousand times by now. I recognize the adrenaline rush from the old days.

I get into position. I know exactly where every part of my body has to be. I’m one with my hoverblades. I start out, gliding effortlessly for a few meters, then, slowing down, I give my blades the special double kickback, and then I’m up, up, up in the air, soaring like a bird. I go for way longer than anybody I’ve seen, and I do a tricky little stunt in the air to really knock their socks off. (And once I land, I do a couple of cool dance moves for extra measure.)

“That was amazing,” Haley squeals when I get off the floor to thunderous applause. “You’re so much better than me, and I’ve been doing it for years!”

“Yeah, I am pretty good,” I say, immodestly.

“Better than good,” Ashleigh says, coming up to us.

Ash, who really is volunteering at a community center! Almost every day after school and on the weekends! And she’s turned *nice*! (Okay, her niceness has a bit of an edge. Actually, she’s pretty sarcastic. She’s a lot like me, come to think of it.)

Dick Jones comes up to us and says, “You looked great out there, Floe.”

“Thanks. You, too.” Earlier in the evening, he’d done a little showing off himself. In the past, I might have thought it was a shrewd political move. But he, like his daughter, is different now. More relaxed and genuine. And truly interested in helping people.

“You know, Floe,” Jones continues, “it’s occurred to me you’d be a wiz in politics. You should really think about it as a future career.”

Careers. I have to start seriously thinking about all that stuff. College is looming in a couple years.

But politics? While I was ‘sleeping’, there was a Black President and a female President, but I’m not sure the world is ready for a frozen zombie President.

I smile. “I’ll think about it,” I tell Jones.

He winks. “Good. Anytime you want to stuff envelopes in my office, get some experience, let me know.”

Ugh. Like I really want to spend my weekends stuffing envelopes when I could be with my parents, who are due to be thawed next week! Or out hoverblading or sketching on the beach.

Jones goes back to his wife, who’s busy treating the wait staff badly, and Haley heads toward the hoverblading floor.

Ash, next to me, looks around. I know exactly what she's thinking. "How do you think they'd react if they knew?" she asks.

I shrug. "Everybody's got secrets. Who knows? Maybe they're all aliens."

She laughs. "They're gonna find out, you know."

"Yeah."

"It's gonna be tough."

I look at her. "Like it hasn't been tough 'till now?"

"It's gonna be tougher."

"I'm ready."

She smiles. "Well, you did learn to hoverblade."

"Yup. And now there's just one more thing I have to do before this little adventure is over."

She grins. "Hard to believe a blader girl's getting so excited about a dance."

"It's not just a *dance*," I say defensively. "It's the *prom*. And I definitely have something to prove."

"Popsicle girl, I have the feeling you're *always* gonna have something to prove..."

