

I WAS A TEENAGE
POPSICLE

Fun and
easy!
cool!
BW

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Bev Katz Rosenbaum



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For Brian, Andie, and Ricky, with love.

(See—dreams really can come true!)

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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 yoga-on-the-beach session with Tonya, the one where we raised money for the Venice Beach 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 intently, 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.

Bev Katz Rosenbaum

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* seem to be the injured and confused one here?

He swipes at his eyes. "You're in a safe place, Floe." At least he doesn't have the scary German accent. "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 lymphaticosis, a highly contagious respiratory disease . . .

"Was I in a coma?" I ask slowly. My tongue seems to be having trouble moving, and I'm *totally* 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 add, starting 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 *have*

I Was a Teenage Popsicle

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 lymphaticosis? 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 rehabilita-

tion.” 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.

Okaaay, 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 from 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 strange men.” Too late, I remember this important bit of advice from my women’s studies teacher at Venice Beach Alternative School. Which isn’t really an alternative school, since in Venice Beach, “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 Was a Teenage Popsicle

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

“My dad, too?” I ask softly.

“Yes,” he says quietly. “It wasn’t your fault, Floe. The Venice Beach 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. More mouthy than usual, that is.

He perches at the side of my bed, studies 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 really called vitrification. Freezing can preserve organs, but it also expands and 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 dis-

covered a wonderful new way to cryopreserve 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 favorites.” 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 laugh—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. “It’s semantics, really. 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 faintly. 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

I Was a Teenage Popsicle

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's happily chattering on. “Then, once you were here at the Venice Beach 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 devitrify people.”

“Wow,” I say, kind of stunned.

“After you were devitrified,” he continues happily, “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 look—brand new.” 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 Z30 and F9B added

into the mix 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 Beach will think I'm a freak.

"But later today, we're going to be reviving another Venice Beach teen with lymphaticotosis, so you'll have some company."

I wonder distractedly if it will be anyone I know.

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, pan-

I Was a Teenage Popsicle

icked 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's really off his nut. "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 Valley-type chick who looks like Brittany Murphy.

Brittany comes closer. Strange. She's got Sunny's eyes. But this can't be my sister Sunny. Sunny used to look like Dakota Fanning.

"Floe?" the Valley 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 . . .

Bev Katz Rosenbaum

“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 reintegration 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.

Dixon's office.

I can barely sit still in my chair. *Taz Taber* is sitting next to me! The thawed Venice Beach teen with lymphaticosis did, indeed, turn out to be someone I know. It turned out to be *the guy I was in love with all last year!* (Well, my last year of school, anyway.) Which has totally taken my mind off the fact that my little sister is now my older sister. (Try wrapping your head around that one!)

Taz is a year older than me, so he hung with a different crowd, but he's into blading, art, music, and movies, just like me! And he seems to really like me—he's always winking at me during physical rehab! Which is led by a dead ringer for Vin Diesel who works us harder than any masochistic gym teacher would ever dare. Not that we had

any masochistic gym teachers at Venice Beach Alternative. VBA gym teachers do yoga and give blading tips.

I'm *dying* to tell Emma Moder—my best bud from VBA. She'd have a *conniption* if she knew I was stuck here with Taz! I'm determined to look her up when I get out, even though Dixon and his wife, Bea—short for Beatrice—kinda want us to keep this whole cryonics thing under wraps till there are more of us frozen freakazoids roaming the earth. They don't want us to become tabloid targets, and neither do we, being skater types who like our freedom way too much.

I'm still a little unnerved from seeing Taz all hot and sweaty—we just had rehab—but aside from that, Dixon's agreed to spring us in the afternoon for a little trip to the beach! I can't wait!

I put a hand to my hair and say a silent prayer of thanks to the universal being for making me look half decent today. Last night, I realized I needed a really good haircut. (That liquid nitrogen stuff is murder on the hair. Split ends galore.) One of the nurses, who actually went to hairdressing school, gave me a great shaggy cut and applied a temporary auburn rinse to my light brown locks. It looks fab. My parents left a whole bunch of cool outfits here for me—along with a family picture I sleep with every night—but today I'm sporting my absolute fave: my most comfortable fatigue-style cargo pants, my vintage Rolling Stones tee, and my red Converse runners.

"Let's talk about expectations," says the doc, who I'm

I Was a Teenage Popsicle

actually now calling by his first name, Abe. (Well, it's really Abercrombie, but I refuse to call him that.)

"What about them?" I ask impatiently.

He leans back in his chair and steeples his fingers. "There are going to be some things that aren't so easy for you to get used to."

I shrug. "Doesn't seem that way so far. It's only been ten years. Things haven't changed that drastically."

"Well, I can't predict what's going to happen, but there are bound to be a number of new challenges—some technological, some emotional—you'll come up against that frustrate you. It's not all going to be easy."

"Yeah," Taz says, "but that's real life, right, Doc? Nothing ever goes perfectly—even for people who haven't been frozen."

Abe smiles. "That's exactly the attitude I want to encourage. Good for you, Taz."

"Hey," I break in, offended, "I have the same attitude."

"Wonderful." Abe's smile widens. "So, how would you like to try something new before we break?"

"Always," I answer promptly. "What's on tap?"

"Well, you guys are skater punks, right?"

Taz and I look at each other and grin. Abe's definitely been watching too many bad movies to familiarize himself with our skater lifestyle. I'm willing to bet his normal viewing choices are documentaries about—well, who knows what. The guy's a *cryonicist*.

He swivels his chair around and picks something up off

the floor behind him. Then he swivels back around and holds up two pairs of inline skates.

"Blades! Awesome!" I squeal.

"You're going to have a lot of fun with these."

"We going outside?" I ask hopefully.

"Not just yet. We'll practice in the gym."

"Uh, Doc, we don't need practice," Taz says. "We've been blading all our lives."

"Not with these, you haven't."

"What's so special about those?" I ask.

"Well, let's just say you won't be scratching my newly polished gym floor." He smiles and stands. "Let's go."

Taz and I grin at each other again. Abe really loves showing us new stuff. He's this old-guy genius, but I swear, sometimes he acts like a six-year-old kid.

We follow him to the gym, where he hands us the blades and says, "Put them on." He's almost wriggling with excitement.

"They look like good ones," I comment, crouching to do up the Velcro straps. "Like my last pair." Which I'm sure Sunny's gotten rid of. I hope Abe will let me keep these.

"They're the best," he assures me. "You ready?" he asks Taz.

"Ready," Taz says a second later, winking at me. I love when he winks at me.

"Okay then, let me tell you a little about how these work."

"Please, Abe, can't we just go?" I beg. I'm dying to let loose.

I Was a Teenage Popsicle

"Well, Floe, I think you'll find these won't do so well on the ground."

Taz frowns. "What the heck's that supposed to mean?"

"Well . . ." He pauses dramatically. "They're not inline skates. They're hoverblades."

"Hoverblades," I exclaim. "You mean—"

"Yup," he says. "You can fly."

"But—" Taz breaks off. "It's only been ten years. People are *flying* now?"

"Well, not for very long," Abe admits. "You can only go a few yards at a time. Then you have to touch down and go again. But it's the closest man—or woman—" he adds, nodding at me, "has gotten with the flying thing."

"Wow," I murmur. "Very cool. So, how do they work?"

"Well," he says. "See those levers on the back of each blade—on the right side of the left one, and the left side of the right one?"

"Yup," I say.

Taz says, "Ditto."

"You have to glide for a few seconds, then sort of lean forward in a kind of speed-skating pose, and quickly flick each lever. You'll be launched up and forward, not exactly horizontally, but not completely vertically."

Sounds easy enough. "Ooo, lemme try," I say excitedly.

"Okay," the doc says, smiling. "But don't be surprised if it takes a while to catch on. I can't seem to get the hang of it myself."

Taz and I exchange a glance and I have to work really

hard to keep from laughing now. The image of Abe hoveringblading is just too much.

“Ha,” I say, when I’ve achieved some control. “He doesn’t know who he’s dealing with.”

“Let’s show him how it’s done.” Taz winks again. I tell ya, I can’t get enough of that wink.

“Is the gym big enough?” I ask the doc. I can’t wait to take off!

“Oh, you’re not going to go as far as you think,” he responds, still smiling.

“Like I said, you don’t know who you’re dealing with.” I get into position. God, it feels good to have blades on again—even if they aren’t the kind I’m used to, and even if we are inside.

“Can I give it a shot?” I ask Abe.

“Be my guest,” he says.

I glide for a while—not very far, just a couple of yards. I start to slow down after that—not because of anything I’m doing. Guess that’s my cue to get into that speed-skating position and kick the levers, so I do—and end up falling on the floor. Bum first, thankfully.

I look behind me. Taz has fallen, too.

“Guess it’ll take a little while to get our blade legs back,” I say sheepishly.

“Guess Vin’s gotta step up that training,” Taz quips.

“Who’s Vin?” Abe asks, confused.

We laugh again.

“Physical rehab guy,” I say.

I Was a Teenage Popsicle

“Oh—you mean Anton!”

“Sure, Anton,” Taz says.

I have the feeling we’re gonna keep referring to him as Vin.

“It’s funny,” I murmur, studying my hoverblades, “but it doesn’t feel like it’s a not-knowing-how-to-blade thing. I felt okay leading up to the kicking-the-lever thing. I’m not sure what went wrong.”

“It’s harder than you think,” Abe says. “I know it sounds crazy, but you have to almost become one with the blades.”

“That’s a very Venice Beach-y thing to say, Doc,” I tease.

“I may be a science nerd, but I’m a Venice Beach science nerd,” he replies with a perfectly straight face. “You have to kick the levers at exactly the right time, really quickly. Apparently it’s much easier for little kids who start out on them and don’t have any experience on regular blades. But I’m sure you’ll get the hang of it soon,” he adds quickly, probably as a result of the ice-cold look I send his way.

“Oh, I’ll get it,” I grind out. “No worries there.”

“I’m sure you will,” he says. Like he’s pacifying me or something. Grrrr.

“Wanna go again?” Taz asks once we’re up.

“You bet,” I respond.

“That’s my girl,” he says before taking off.

My girl! I try not to hyperventilate.

Okay, confession time: I’ve never even been kissed. And you’d better believe now that I’m twenty-six—at least, I think I am; this whole age thing is extremely confusing—the

matter of getting kissed is going to be taking on considerably more urgency. (Dare I even hope Taz Taber will be my first?)

I start to follow him—and fall again—after crashing into *my guy*. (Sorry, had to say it!)

Since I'm all tangled up in Taz's arms and fulfilling a life-long (well, yearlong, anyway) dream, I'm not at all peeved about not being able to get the hang of this stupid new sport.

Have I mentioned that Taz's long, jet-black hair always smells great, and that his breath is always warm and minty? Or that his eyes are like liquid brown pools, and his skin is so unbelievably smooth and velvety looking, I have to almost physically restrain myself to keep from reaching out and touching it?

He helps me up (again) and smiles. "Keep going?"

"Oh, yeah," I say breathlessly.

We go again a few more times.

And then, despite all the getting-tangled-up-with-Taz stuff, I start to get ticked off. When Abe calls out, "Getting there, Floe," I snap back, "Not even close, Doc!"

He just looks at me and nods.

Taz murmurs, "Easy, Floe," and I have to restrain myself from lashing out at him, too.

It's the first time I think maybe this guy's a little *too* perfect. I, on the other hand, possess an appalling number of negative traits, many of which will surely start to reveal themselves now that I'm getting my first inkling of how hard it's going to be to get used to some of this new stuff.

I Was a Teenage Popsicle

Patience has never been one of my virtues, and I'm responding with a kind of panicky anger.

I did a ton of yoga back in Venice Beach, but I never did master that Zen thing. Although I guess I did become one with my inline skates.

So why the heck can't I manage to become one with my hoverblades?

The doc's watching me closely now. "Maybe that's enough for today."

On our way out, Abe calls me into his office. Once I'm sitting, he says, "You got upset in there."

"Yeah," I say, rubbing my eyes. "I'm sorry about that. I shouldn't have taken it out on you." I look away. "I guess I'm just disappointed that the hoverblading thing is gonna take longer to learn than I thought it would."

"There are some things that are going to be hard, Floe," he says. "Remember we talked about unreasonable expectations?"

"I remember," I mumble.

He studies me for a long moment. "You and Taz seem to have developed quite a close relationship."

"Well, we are the only two thawed frozen zombies on earth."

The doc almost winces. "I wish you wouldn't refer to yourself that way."

I close my eyes. "Sorry again. I don't mean to be—disrespectful. I'm grateful you brought me back to life." I think. I haven't been out in the real world yet, so I'm not quite sure.

Bev Katz Rosenbaum

He leans back in his chair, his expression serious, his eyes meeting mine. “You’re a strong person, Floe, with tremendous inner resources.” He pauses. “I’m glad you and Taz are close. But you’ll want to avoid leaning on him. That closeness may or may not last—out there.”

It’s something I’ve thought about. I have plenty of time—way too much—to think about stuff. “Yeah, whatever,” I say, as if I don’t care.

Trust me, I care.



Sprung!

Bea, Abe's Einstein-like wife, is our chaperone.

"So, where are we off to?" Taz says.

She smiles. "There's a new strip of stores just a couple of blocks from here. You wanted to go shopping, correct?"

"Right," I say. But Taz and I look at each other uneasily. Venice Beach was our turf. Is it going to be totally unfamiliar to us now?

Nah, I tell myself. *It's only been ten years.*

Once outside, Taz and I stop in our tracks. It feels like someone's shining a spotlight right in my face.

No wonder we've only been taken out for a few seconds at a time, at dusk and dawn.

Bev Katz Rosenbaum

Bea says soothingly, "Take your time. We'll just wait here until you're ready."

It takes a good few minutes to get used to the glare. And it's not even glare—it's just normal sunlight!

I begin to feel a bit of the same panicky anger I experienced this morning, after hoverblading (or rather, not hoverblading).

After a while, Taz and I nod to each other, and start walking, slowly.

I feel myself wobbling a bit.

"The overwhelming sensory experience is affecting your motor skills," Bea explains gently.

Okay, now I'm *really* angry. It's not fair that even these basic things are so *hard*!

"I'm right here beside you," Taz murmurs, putting an arm around my shoulder.

Holy guacamole! I wobble even more when he says *that*.

In a few minutes, we're steadier.

Feeling calmer now, even a bit excited—not to mention tickled that Taz's hand shows no sign of leaving my shoulder—I take in the sights and sounds around us like a kindergarten on a field trip.

The general look of the area is the same. The Cryonics Center is close to home—at least where home used to be—between Windward Circle and the beach, in an old factory space. I'm relieved to see that almost everything is totally recognizable. My beloved hometown—the beach culture center of America—is still the same funky place I love, a

I Was a Teenage Popsicle

crazy quilt of weird-looking buildings (there's the binocular-shaped one!) and even weirder-looking characters.

As we get closer to the beach, I'm tickled to see the Beachman—a guy who does these fabulous sand sculptures—hard at work right across from the famous Sidewalk Café and the boardwalk. He's a little gray around the temples, but hey, I'm a thawed zombie, so who am I to talk?

Oh, and there's the guy who juggles three electric knives. (How do you think he learned to do that??) He and the Beachman are the only sidewalk performers I recognize out today, but it's a weekday, so the beach isn't as busy as it usually gets, for which I'm hugely grateful. Large crowds might have pushed me over the edge.

There are a few hoverbladers on the boardwalk.

"You look like you're about to throw eggs at them," Taz murmurs. "Take it easy."

I toss my ponytail. "Just wait. I'll take 'em soon enough."

"You go, girl," he says, grinning.

I decide to focus on fashion. Women seem to be shaving their heads in large numbers, and Star Trek-style unitards are everywhere, though people here in the Beach are accessorizing them with vintage combat boots and safety pin earrings. In the more conservative areas, like the Valley, where Sunny lives (I can't believe I'm actually going to have to live there, too), the accessories of choice are huge crystals. (I know because Sunny, all decked out in a red Trekkie-type unitard and sporting at least ten huge rocks on various places on her person, came to visit last night—with her un-

employed, former-used-car-salesman hubby, Andrew, who was also loaded up with crystals.)

“Well, what do you think?” Bea asks, and I’m jolted out of my reverie.

We’re standing in front of a strip of stores I don’t recognize.

But they’re the kind of stores I know and love. I breathe a huge sigh of relief. One of them is a great vintage clothing depot—with a new and used book section at the back of it. Next door is a great-looking organic supermarket and café, which Bea is eyeing.

“I promised the cook I’d pick some things up,” she explains. She smiles. “Before you go, he wants to make your favorites.”

“Tex-Mex and Thai!” Taz and I say in unison. We discovered our uncannily similar food preferences early on at the center.

I’m thrilled at the prospect of Tex-Mex and Thai, but I don’t like being reminded of the fact that we’re going to be going home in a few days. (Not that the Valley’s my home . . .)

“Why don’t you go on in, Bea, get what you need? Floe and I are fine by ourselves,” Taz says innocently.

Being a science nerd, she doesn’t get that he’s not serious. “Oh, I can’t leave you two for that long,” she tells us earnestly. “We’ll get you both some clothes first, then have some lunch at the café, then pick up the groceries.”

We go in, and the proprietor, a young guy with a green

I Was a Teenage Popsicle

Mohawk, eyes my outfit appreciatively. "Great look! Nice to see some non-space explorers around."

We smile, but stop smiling a minute later, when we start rifling through racks. Even the vintage stores are filled with the unitard things, though the oldest of the bunch can only be about nine years old.

"I can't believe I might actually have to buy one of these," Taz mutters.

"The Beach kids are still wearing lots of genuine vintage," Bea says confidently. When we look at her, she says, "I took a few field trips. Hovered around a few schoolyards."

"Hovered, not hoverbladed, right?" I ask suspiciously.

"Oh, heavens, no. I'll never get the hang of those things. I keep meaning to work out the mathematical formula for successful timing and positioning—just haven't had the time." She clears her throat. "As I was saying, I hovered around a few schoolyards here and in the Valley to see what the kids were wearing." She titters. "Nearly had the police called on me."

The image of Bea getting hauled away by the cops is right up there with the image of Abe hoverblading.

"So, what did you find out?" I ask curiously.

"Well, I think Taz can probably get away with a whole wardrobe of vintage clothing—the kind you're both used to. You, Floe, on the other hand, may want to purchase a few unitards, as you'll be living in the Valley."

Lucky me, I think glumly.

Something occurs to me. “Um, Bea, I think I’ll have to wait for Sunny to buy stuff.” How weird is *that* thought! “I don’t have any money.”

Bea smiles. “Don’t worry about the cost. It’s on the center. It’s part of the reintegration process.”

“Really? Awesome!”

“Righteous,” Taz says, grabbing an armful of clothes (*not* unitards). “To the dressing rooms.”

“Can I help you guys?” a girl asks us.

A tall, blond, beautiful beach goddess.

Taz smiles at her.

Not the kind of smile he’s been aiming at me lately, but still.

Something—not quite panic, but close—seizes me.

Something that confirms my fear that Abe was right: this thing I’ve got going with Taz—whatever it is—isn’t real. It’s just the result of going through something together, like summer camp.

But then Taz turns to me with an even wider smile and says, “Let’s rock and roll,” and I push the evil thoughts away.

We have a ball modeling for each other. Even though the goddess persists in checking out Taz a little too closely, he doesn’t do anything too flirty with her—he saves all his special smiles and arm touches for me.

After we buy a ton of clothes, we spend a while in the books-and-music section. (Did I mention Taz is a guitar player extraordinaire who writes his own songs? Sigh . . .)

There are no CDs for sale—everybody downloads every-

I Was a Teenage Popsicle

thing now—but we listen to some new tunes on the couple of music players they have in the store. Earphones are just buttons now—no wires. Abe's demonstrated all the new technology for us. Basically, everything's just smaller. Laptops are now more like belt buckle tops.

Madonna's daughter Lourdes is doing some interesting stuff. Ditto the Rolling Stones, though their interesting new sound is probably related to their age—it's sort of a pneumatic death rattle. (On the poster advertising their most recent tour, they look even more scarily skeletal than they did before I croaked.)

When we're done scouting out the new music, we check out the books. Would you believe Justin Timberlake and Britney Spears have both just released *memoirs*?

After that, we go to the organic supermarket/café and grab a table. Between tofu stir-fries and sundaes, Bea excuses herself to go to the bathroom after extracting promises that we won't go anywhere.

"Nice to be out, huh?" Taz says, looking at me.

"Yeah." I smile at him.

"You scared?" he says after a moment.

"Terrified," I admit.

He nods. "I know," he says quietly. "It's all kinda surreal."

An enormous sense of relief washes over me. He feels the same way I do! Until now, we've talked, but not *talked*. And he's the only one who can possibly understand what I'm going through, how bizarre everything feels. The words come tumbling out . . .

“Exactly! It’s almost too much to think about it. I’ve been having the strangest dreams . . .”

He nods again. “I have dreams, too. Well, more like nightmares.” He pauses. “Abe told you they don’t know what the long-term effects of vitrification are, right?”

I nod. Something else to worry about, aside from having to get used to a whole new world.

“Your parents are being preserved, right?”

“Yeah,” I say softly. I’m not allowed into the vat preservation room, can’t see them. Too traumatic, Abe says. Not that I’m arguing with him—I’m not sure I want to see what being preserved in a vat of liquid nitrogen looks like. Talk about nightmares.

Mom and Dad are coming back, I tell myself for the hundredth time. *They’re coming back*.

“Your sister Sunny stayed with my parents for a while,” Taz says.

“Yeah, so I heard.” My parents had no living relatives, and their crazy Venice Beach artist friends apparently forgot about us, like, five minutes after we left for New York. The Tabers ended up settling in Marshland for a few years, and Sunny lived with them after my parents got sick and were frozen.

I look at him, curious. “Did they say anything about her? I don’t mean to pry,” I add. “It’s just that I’m going to be living with her, and I feel like I don’t even know her anymore.”

“Yeah, that must be weird.” He gives me a sympathetic

I Was a Teenage Popsicle

look, and I just about swoon. “My folks are basically the same. Ten years makes a big difference when you’re our age, not so much when you’re older. They look and act pretty much the same as they did before.” He shrugs. “They said Sunny was well-behaved. I don’t think they really got her. She’s a pretty straight-arrow kid, right?”

I nod. “Yeah.” I guess I’m a straight-arrow kid, too, in some ways (e.g. where guys are concerned), but as far as interests go, I’m pretty out there and Venice Beach-y, like Taz.

“My mom was all worried that she—your sister—was repressing stuff.” He shrugs and grins. “My mom’s pretty Californian.”

I grin back. “I could tell.” I met his zine-publisher parents a couple days after Taz was thawed. They’re totally cool. So cool they’ve bought a house back in Venice Beach.

“Sunny went back to California the minute she turned eighteen. They tried to keep in touch with her, but they said she seemed determined to shake them.”

I nod. “She’s living in the Valley. And she’s married. With a baby.”

He lifts his eyebrows. “Isn’t she, like, still pretty young?”

I nod again. “Twenty-three.” I still can’t believe it.

He shakes his head. “Guess she wanted a family of her own real bad,” he says quietly.

Huh. I never thought of that.

I look at him.

Bev Katz Rosenbaum

He looks back at me. *Really* looks at me. It's not just an I'm-your-buddy look. At least, I don't think it is.

"You know, I'm really glad you were with me all through this," he says softly. And with that, he leans over and plants a long, lingering, totally earth-shattering kiss on me.

Worries? What worries?

Pickup day.

Sunny and her unemployed, former-car-salesman husband, Andrew, 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. Taz's parents arrive with his customized skateboard in tow.

The Tabers gush all over Sunny and Andrew and their baby, Jake. (Who is *totally* adorable, BTW. I'm not even going to mind being conscripted for babysitting duty, which Sunny's already hinted I will be—and often.) Sunny's polite, but cool to the Tabers.

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 the *Valley*.

I hug the doctors tightly, then Taz.

"I'll call you," he promises, giving me a quick kiss on the cheek before hopping on his board. "Good luck."

"Same to you," I manage to say, wanting nothing more than to grab on to his waist and skate away with him.

"He's cute." Sunny starts walking to the van and gestures for us to follow. "A bit too Beach, though."

"What's wrong with Beach?" I say.

Andrew, who has his arm around Sunny, turns to look at me, the third wheel, and smiles patronizingly. "Now, Floe, 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 Mom and Dad's freakin' crazy ideas." She looks at me. "Although your skin does look fabulous." She pauses. "Not

I Was a Teenage Popsicle

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 Valley full of Janice Dickinson look-alikes 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!* Who is now my official guardian. Which is nearly as scary as the Janice Dickinson image.

"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 back. 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 deteriorated 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? I wonder, incredulous. *You're twenty-three and you have a baby and a mortgage and an unemployed husband!*

"They were spontaneous," I say evenly.

Sunny and Andrew exchange extremely annoying smiles.

"How long do you think they thought about your name?" Andrew chuckles.

"What's wrong with my name?" I demand. What's wrong with this *guy*? I'm a dangerous woman—a walking, talking, thawed zombie! Has he not seen any horror movies? Why isn't he *afraid* of me?

He's still chuckling. "Floe with an *e*. Who spells Floe with an *e*?"

"Isn't it the Valley people who are into all the crazy spellings now? Madysyn and Syndi and so on? The Venice Beachers did it first, and at least the stuff they came up with was meaningful. It's Floe, like *ice floe*," I add.

"Um, yeah," Sunny says, rolling her eyes.

"Kind of eerie, don't you think? Destiny. I was, after all, frozen."

I happen to know it was Dixon who talked Mom and Dad into freezing me—they just came up with this stupid spelling out of nowhere—but it feels good to have made Sunny and Andrew uncomfortable. I see them glance uneasily at each other. We don't talk the rest of the way home.

Which turns out to be a sprawling McMansion completely devoid of personality.

Oh, it's been decorated—in that aggressively modern Star

I Was a Teenage Popsicle

Trek-ish way. It's the residential equivalent of the outfit. The minute I step into it, I feel a sharp longing for my parents' chaotic Venice Beach abode.

"Nice, huh?" Sunny says smugly.

"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 USS *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, unable to help myself.

Sunny frowns. "Don't be silly. It's—spare. Very fashionable." She tosses her head. "After living in that crazy Venice Beach 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 Valley sister/Mom now. "Of course, *dear*. I'll let you get settled, and then we'll have some dinner."

I look around my "room." "What's to settle?"

She points to a shelf—the one adornment in the room—and frowns.

"Ah, yes," I say. "I'll be sure to put away my five outfits. What's for dinner, anyway?"

"Beef stew," she answers promptly.

I look at her. "I'm a vegetarian."

Sunny forces a smile. "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 is absolutely nothing to do in my

I Was a Teenage Popsicle

“room”—no books, no all-in-one (the combo minicomputer/music player/game system/camera/phone that apparently all North American teens have now), nothing to even look at. I think I once read about a sophisticated form of torture involving a similar room. Oh, there is a videophone, but I have no one to phone. Except for Taz, whom I saw about a half hour ago and who will think I’m crazy for calling, especially as he’ll probably be all busy with fabulous Venice Beach-type stuff.

When I get to the kitchen, Andrew and Sunny gesture me over to the Lucite 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 doing yoga?” Andrew asks in disgust.

Sunny says impatiently, “Floe, yoga 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 VBA 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 overemotional teenager again.

“Of course you’re going to Cactus Hill Secondary School,” Sunny responds breezily. “It’s our local school. We’re in an excellent school district,” she says 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 Beach 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 Gurlz dolls’ heads way back when. Clearly, this is payback time. (FYI, the Gurlz were plastic, scantily clad faux celebs that had a moment of trend fame a couple of decades ago.)

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

“But Taz is there,” I sputter lamely. “There must be a way—”

I Was a Teenage Popsicle

"There isn't," Sunny says curtly.

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

I cross my arms. "This is about the Gurlz, isn't it?"

"Gurlz? Floe, what on earth are you talking about?"

"You never forgave me for shaving your Gurlz' heads."

She smiles at Andrew. "For some reason, she thinks that 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 slightly. "You think that was 'harmless fun'? You think being regarded as a freak by your sister and your own parents is 'harmless'? You think it's 'harmless fun' to destroy other people's possessions? 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 preteen, and as far as they were concerned, shaving my Gurlz' heads was *performance art!*"

Her words hit me in the gut with the force of a ramp flip gone wrong. 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 Gurlz dolls.

"I loved my Gurlz," Sunny mutters.

Oh, crap. Now I feel like an ungrateful witch. I lean over and hug her awkwardly. "I know you did, Sunny. 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.

"Hey"—I decide a change of topic is a really good idea—"did I tell you I saw the Windsongs a few days ago?" (Old Venice Beach artist friends of my folks. I saw them on the way back to the center, after our little day trip.)

"You did?" Sunny asks, her eyes going wide. I can just see the wheels turning in her mind, and I get ticked off at

I Was a Teenage Popsicle

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

"No, I didn't," I say, forcing myself not to roll my eyes. "I let them think I never died, that I was just sick this whole time." As Bea only recently discovered how to reverse lymphaticosis (at least the first strain—apparently, new ones are constantly popping up), it's a reasonable assumption.

"So they think you were, like, in a coma?" Andrew says. Jeez, no wonder he's unemployed. Clearly, while I was in my vitrified sleep, 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 Beach 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 life. I briefly wonder if the "spare" look of her home is due more to poverty than fashion. After all, neither she nor Andrew has a job.

"Sunny, how are you two even managing to pay the mortgage on this house?"

Sunny draws herself up and says in a schoolmarm tone, "Floe, just seconds ago you apologized for disrespecting me—"

Darn. Told you she'd think she was perfect if I apologized.

"—so I'm going to ask you to please watch that impulsive tongue of yours."

Looking at Andrew again, she says, "Now, Andrew and I are prepared to forgive this little outburst. You have no idea what kind of work we did when you were, um, sleeping."

I've gotta admit, she has a point there.

She draws herself up even taller in her chair, and I immediately sense trouble. Forgive me, my behind. That look means she has it in for me. I know the look well, having used it on many occasions in my past life as a big sister.

"Speaking of money"—here it comes— "we've decided to give you a weekly allowance."

I stare at her. "You're kidding, right?"

She gives me a flinty glance. "Why would I be kidding?"

I close my eyes. "How much?"

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.

I Was a Teenage Popsicle

“That’s it?” (I still grab the dough.) “Mom was giving me three times that! Wait’ll she hears!”

Sunny and Andrew exchange glances.

“What?” I say suspiciously.

“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 and clicks on a channel with a menu. I vaguely remember Abe showing me how the new cable system worked.

“We saw this announcement while you were upstairs,” she says softly. She clicks on “Archives,” and a couple of other things, and then I see a unitard-clad news reader say: “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 arrangement! 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.

Bev Katz Rosenbaum

“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.

5

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 Beach from here—no clue if buses run there, or what. I do suspect my “allowance” is probably less than 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—a little harried, 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 Cullen. 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. (That freedom thing, remember?)

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, 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?"

I Was a Teenage Popsicle

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 so much easier if I lived in Venice Beach. 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 the Valley.

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, and even wearing a Star Trek-ish unitard (I didn’t want to make things worse for myself on my first day by sticking out like a sore thumb), 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.

I’m suddenly hit with the bitter knowledge that no amount of preparation could have, well, prepared me for Cactus Hill High.

Like I don’t have enough on my mind. Like the fact that my parents might never be thawed. (Nope, can’t even think

that way.) Like what the heck I am to Taz Taber. He didn't even call last night. Obviously we're not boyfriend and girlfriend, but I thought we were *almost* boyfriend and girlfriend. Was Abe right? Was any chance we had at a "relationship" outside the center doomed?

I'm so bad at this stuff.

And now I have to deal with school.

Despite having been told about holographic instructors ("Teachers are always the first to go with certain governments," Abe told us), I can't help but stare.

"Do you ever get used to them?" I make the mistake of whispering to a pretty 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, like, totally warped or something?"

"Sorry," I feel compelled to 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 Beach," I answer weakly, turning my attention back to my work. It's 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. The material might

I Was a Teenage Popsicle

as well be Greek, and the kids treat me like I'm an alien. (I'm a thawed zombie, which is *completely* different.)

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

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

As I'm somewhat of a specialist in the cryonics field, 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 the life of a terminally ill person who can no longer be supported by ordinary medicine,” 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 have been using a combination of liquid nitrogen and some newly discovered chemicals like Z30 and F9B 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. I let out a breath and hurry on. “The goal is to carry the person forward through time, for however many years—I mean decades or centuries—might be necessary, until the person can be restored to health.”

When I'm done, I realize I've hurt more than helped my-

self. 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 lunchroom 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 stares again. "What are you, blind? Can't you see it's already taken?"

Excuse me?

I look again.

Suddenly, I'm all out of patience. "Look, I'm really not up for a prank, or whatever. I'll just sit on the floor."

And then I hear it. A mewling sound. Coming from the chair. It's like there's a . . . cat or something on it.

"What was that?" I ask suspiciously.

She stares. "It's my scheduler. Are you deaf?"

"Your scheduler," I repeat, taking a closer look. Sure enough, there's a near-transparent cat on the chair.

"Duh, yeah. My Skedpet."

"Skedpets—I know about those!" I say excitedly. Abe showed them to us. They're holographic pets that also act

I Was a Teenage Popsicle

as scheduling devices—Tamagotchis crossed with Palm Pilots. They're all the rage with teens.

She looks at me like I'm an escaped mental patient. When her cat says, "Cheerleading in five minutes, Halley," she says, "Thanks, Kitty," then presses a button on a (tiny, natch) control pad, and the cat disappears.

"Wow," I say, "that's only the second one I've seen in action."

She looks at me again. "We're not supposed to bring them to school, but everybody does. Where in Venice Beach did you live, anyway? A hut on the sand?"

I shake my head mutely.

She shakes her head, too. "I'm Halley Rogers," she says.

"Floë Ryan," I say.

Just then, another girl, a Mischa Barton look-alike (hmm, wonder what Mischa's up to these days?), and a couple of Mischa wanna-bes come over and appraise me coolly. They're carrying purses, and I realize they were sitting with Halley and have just returned from one of those mass bathroom visits.

I wonder idly why Halley didn't join them.

Mischa aims an icy glance at me.

Halley says, "Ashleigh, Floë, Floë, Ashleigh."

Ashleigh says an abrupt, "Hi," and then, apparently deciding I'm not worth talking to, turns away and says to Halley, "Cheer practice. You coming?"

"In a minute. You go ahead."

Before she can shoot me another *Mean Girls* look and

walk away, a cute, if somewhat vapid-looking, blond guy comes up to the table and says, "Hey, girls."

"Hey, guy," Ashleigh says, smirking. She's definitely hot for this dude.

He looks over at me and says, "And who's this?"

"This is Floe. She's new," Halley says. "Floe, Kalel."

Kalel? I think. *Like Superman, and Nic Cage's kid?* I bite down an urge to laugh.

"Hey, Floe," Kalel says. "Nice to know you." His smile says he wouldn't mind knowing me a little better.

That's a good thing, I tell myself. If I get asked out by this obviously popular guy, it'll establish my reputation as an A-lister.

And I might as well accept if he asks, because I don't know what the heck's going on with Taz.

And I'm lonely.

Now Ashleigh does shoot me that *Mean Girls* look.

Yeah, she's definitely hot for Kalel.

Which may not bode well for my A-list status if Kalel keeps on looking at me the way he's looking at me.

She turns to Halley again. "You coming?"

"I said, in a minute." Do I detect a note of impatience? What's the story *there*?

"You go ahead."

Ashleigh tilts her head like she's about to say something, then clearly changes her mind. She pivots on her heel, and with a toss of her ponytail, she flounces away, her gang of wanna-bes following. Kalel smiles, shrugs, and takes off, too.

I Was a Teenage Popsicle

Once they're gone, Halley turns back to me. "That's Ashleigh Jones. She's sort of the queen of the school."

"Not a very polite one," I comment.

Halley pauses for a second before saying, "Don't tick her off." She gives me an appraising look. "You seem like a troublemaker."

"Me?" I say incredulously. "Why? Because my hair's cut differently than yours?"

"Hey, chill." (Little does she know I'm *un*-chilling.) "I'm trying to help you here."

With friends like you . . . I think.

She gets up. "Just remember what I said," she tells me, and then she walks off, leaving me feeling lonelier than I have all day.



“Well, it’s no VBA,” I tell Taz that night on the phone, after trying and failing to get hold of Dixon. The lawsuit is still all over the news. Strangely, Taz doesn’t seem to want to talk about it. “I guess things are great with you,” I add grudgingly.

“Yeah, they are,” he says. “I thought it would be weird being with younger kids, since I’m twenty-seven now—”

“But you’re not twenty-seven. You were frozen—”

“Vitrified.”

“Yeah, vitrified. And your body is your teenaged one.” I feel myself blush as I talk about his body. It’s a good thing he can’t see me.

Or can he? Too late, I remember we’re talking on video-phones.

I Was a Teenage Popsicle

"You're blushing," he teases.

Crap. "Am not," I mutter.

"Are too," he insists. "You blushed when you said *body*."

"You're imagining things." I smile. "So tell me more about school." I don't really want to hear about how great Venice Beach Alternative is, how laid back the kids are, et cetera, but I'm desperate to change the topic.

"Everything's awesome, like I said. Great new group of friends, and I've seen some of the old guys, too, working in the hood."

"Why do they think you haven't aged?" I ask, curious.

"They never asked. Guess they assume it's something to do with the disease or the meds, like Abe said they would. Then again, it's Venice Beach. Everybody looks like a teenager."

"I wish I was there," I say wistfully.

"I wish you were, too. You'd really like this one girl I met—Sari. Way cool. Publishes her own comic book."

Peachy.

Is she a girlfriend? A potential girlfriend? A friend? I have no way of knowing.

"Oh, hey," Taz exclaims, "I've gotta go. Meeting Sari for coffee."

I stop myself from saying anything mean. Can't think about my relationship (or nonrelationship) with Taz now. There's way too much else to think about.

At least, that's what I tell myself.

Wonder of wonders, on Saturday, Sunny offers to take me to the mall to buy me a Skedpet! I'm looking forward to getting one, but also to getting to know my sister again, having a little bonding time.

I should have smelled a rat.

Sunny brings Jake, then saddles me with him when she "coincidentally" bumps into a friend, with whom she promptly goes off for coffee, arranging to meet me back at the mall entrance in an hour.

The good thing is she's given me money to buy a Skedpet and an all-in-one, out of guilt for ditching me, I guess, and my eyes nearly pop out of my skull when I first catch sight of the Skedpet store. (Which is actually called The Skedpet Store!) So much in the mall is the same—The Gap, Old Navy, and Wet Seal are still around, though the fashions in them are assorted variations on the Star Trek theme—but this place isn't like anything I've ever seen.

I hear a voice say, "Omigod, Floe, you look like some hick who's never been to a mall before," and turn to see Halley rolling her eyes. "What's wrong with you? You know, sometimes I think you have potential, and sometimes, you're just the biggest dork on two wheels."

"Hey, Halley," I say. "Are you alone? Don't Valley girls travel in packs?"

She shoots me an amused glance, then gestures with her

I Was a Teenage Popsicle

head toward the store. "I just went to the bathroom. Ashleigh and Kalel are in there."

I look. They're there all right. Ashleigh has her crystal-covered arms all over Kalel.

Halley's eyes have turned into slits.

I look at her closely. "You like him, don't you?"

"Me? Don't be an idiot." She tosses her curls, but avoids my gaze. I'm definitely on to something.

"You do," I insist.

"How the heck would you know?" she demands. "You don't know anything." She looks at Jake, who's happily playing with a rattle in his stroller. "Cute kid. Babysitting?"

"Uh, sort of. Nephew."

"You getting paid?"

"No."

"Huh. You're a good aunt." She points to the scheduler display in the window. "How much money have you got?"

"Hang on," I say. "We have to finish the Kalel thing. What's the deal with him, anyway? Is he Ashleigh's boyfriend?"

She's back to looking at Ashleigh—with narrowed eyes again—and says, "He *was* Ashleigh's boyfriend. They used to go out, but they broke up a while ago. She wanted to get serious, and I don't think he wanted to."

"Ah, a commitment-phobe," I say, trying to sound more sophisticated than I am. The only boys I ever had any contact with in Venice Beach were monosyllabic blader types who were as uninterested in the opposite sex as I was. (My

group was the geeky, blade-all-the-time group, whereas Taz's group consisted of bladers who actually had social lives.)

"No," she says sternly, "just a guy who didn't feel ready for a long-term commitment, especially with the wrong girl."

Okay, I may be unsophisticated, but even I can tell she's *really* deluding herself. Head over heels, I'm telling you.

"And by the way," she adds, "I could never go out with him out of respect for Ashleigh."

Ah.

"Now enough of this," she says, tossing her hair again, "let's get you a Skedpet. That's why you're here, right? How much have you got?" she asks again as we walk in.

Ashleigh and Kael see us. Ashleigh glares. Kael smiles. "Hey, girls."

"Buying Floe here a Skedpet," is all Halley says.

Ashleigh doesn't acknowledge me, just casts a contemptuous glance at Jake's stroller and says, "Meet us at Starbucks when you're done."

"Will do," Halley says.

I try not to wonder how it is that I've made an enemy so quickly after being thawed. How is it I've made an enemy, *period*? It's Cactus Hill's fault, I decide. I never had enemies in Venice Beach.

I take a wallet out of the purse Sunny gave me (which I hate, it's all shiny and silver, but it does seem to be the kind most kids are walking around with), and count out the money she allocated for a Skedpet—twenty-five bucks.

I Was a Teenage Popsicle

Halley looks dubious when she hears the amount. “I don’t know if you can even get an ant for that, never mind a cat or dog. Let’s ask.”

We hunt down a salesperson, who scratches his head when I apprise him of my twenty-five dollar budget. “Well, you can get a turtle or a goldfish for that.”

“I really want something furry. Please?” I plead.

Salesguy’s eyes light up suddenly. “There’s a secondhand mouse I’ve been working on in the back. I think she’s all fixed now.”

“You think?” I say. “Or you know?”

He laughs. “I know. Hang on just a minute and we’ll try her out.”

He comes back a minute later. His right hand is in front of him, and it looks as though he’s holding something, but he’s not. Or he is, but you can’t see it.

“Here,” he says, “put out your hand.”

Okay, this is really weird. I stretch out my hand, and the next thing I know there’s a furry creature in it—but I can’t feel it.

“Omigod,” I whisper. “This is amazing.”

I catch Halley giving the cuckoo signal to the salesperson, and I laugh. “What’s her name?” I say delightedly.

Salesguy shrugs. “I’ve just been calling her ‘Runt.’”

“Runt,” I murmur. “It’s perfect.”

“Perfect for a Venice Beach misfit,” Halley comments, but she’s smiling. “See, there are some good things about the Valley, kiddo.”

“You’re from Venice Beach?” salesguy asks. “There’s a Skedpet store there, but nothin’ to compare to this one.”

“I thought you said nobody in Venice Beach had them,” Halley says.

“Well, not too many,” I say quickly. Wanting to change the topic, I turn back to salesguy. “So how does this work, anyway?” I stroke Runt affectionately, even though I can’t feel anything. But she seems to be loving the stroking, which I love!

Salesguy looks at me curiously. “You’ve never had one?”

“She’s like, from the dark ages,” Halley says, rolling her eyes.

He nods knowingly at her. (*I understand all about those Venice Beach weirdos* is the encoded message in the nod.) “Um, what exactly do you need me to explain?” he says, turning back to me.

“Why don’t you start from the top?” I suggest.

“Um, okay. There’s really not much to know. You input your schedule, or whatever you want to remember, into the control panel—she comes with a pretty good instruction manual—and then Runt will give you vocal reminders of your appointments. The control’s really easy to use.”

“So are you taking her, or what?” Halley asks impatiently.

I smile widely. “You’d better believe I’m taking her.”

Just then, Runt turns over on her back and I laugh delightedly.

Okay, she’s just a hologram, but I need all the company I can get . . .



“Wow, you look—different,” Taz says, sipping his café latte. It’s Sunday night, and we’re at the Havajava Café, which is exactly the same as it was when I used to hang out there: wacky, cartoonish murals on the wall and mismatched garden chairs for seats. After I tried and failed to get hold of Dixon yet again, I talked Sunny into driving me to Venice Beach (after promising to babysit five times in one week). There was no way I was inviting Taz to the Valley.

He’s right about how I look. I’m wearing a silver unitard.

Taz, unlike *moi*, has made no effort to accommodate this new age. He’s wearing baggy jeans and a Sum 41 tee, and though he looks good enough to eat, I feel a surprising twinge of annoyance at the fact that he’s not even trying to dress like someone from this time.

"Yeah, I guess I do look different," I say finally. "Believe it or not, the Star Trek look is growing on me."

"You got a Skedpet," he comments in an amused tone that irritates me no end. Runt is "sitting" beside me.

"Yeah, didn't you?" I take a sip of my cappuccino.

He shakes his head. "Are you kidding? Me? Venice Beach types never got into the gadgets, even Palms, way back when. You know that."

"I guess you guys don't have holographic teachers and stuff."

He shifts (uncomfortably?) in his chair. "Just a few. And some kids have Skedpets. But most of us are artistic types, remember?"

I force myself to smile. Feeling a strange urge to insult him, I say, "Some people use that as an excuse not to learn new stuff."

He seems speechless for a moment. "Yeah, well, not me. I'm a tactile kind of guy." He grins at Runt. "Don't think I could get into a pet that I couldn't feel."

"Runt isn't a pet. She's a holographic scheduling device," I say coolly.

"Right." He frowns, not understanding why I'm being such a rhymes-with-witch. I'm not entirely sure I understand, either.

Well, okay, I do. *Why doesn't he want to be my boyfriend?*

"So how's life in the Valley, anyway?" he asks suddenly.

I shrug. "It's getting a little better. I've made a friend, anyway. I think. Halley Rogers. I mentioned her on the phone."

I Was a Teenage Popsicle

He knits his brow. "I'm sorry—who?"

I don't know what made me think he'd remember. Talking to Taz every other night on the phone is the highlight of *my* pathetic existence, but clearly, he has a life here in Venice Beach.

I'm about to tell him it doesn't matter when I'm distracted by a woman who's staring at me two tables away. Our eyes meet and she goes white.

And I just about faint. It's Emma Moder, my former best friend.

I've been meaning to call her, just haven't gotten around to it—too overwhelmed by getting used to my new home and school situation, not to mention a whole new world.

Emma gets up and slowly walks toward us.

"Floee?" she whispers.

"Emma?" I whisper back, suddenly teary. "Omigod!"

We hug tightly, and when we break apart, she says, "Look at you! How are you feeling? How long have you been back in Venice Beach?"

"Not long," I say, not knowing quite what else to say.

I look at Taz, and he shoots me a sympathetic look, then smiles at Emma. Okay, he's not such a bad guy after all. He's trying to deflect attention off me.

"I'm sorry," I murmur. "Taz, this is Emma—Emma, Taz."

"You look familiar," Emma says.

He smiles. "I went to school with you."

"High school?" Emma asks, knitting her eyebrows.

Right. She's obviously been to university.

"Yeah, high school," Taz answers.

"Oh, right," she says distractedly. She turns back to me. "Flo, I'm so sorry I never . . . I mean, I heard you were in New York, at that clinic, but, you know—"

"I know," I cut her off. "We were just kids. I didn't expect my friends to contact me there."

"And then you never came back, and—"

"I know," I cut her off again. I hate that she feels so bad.

And I hate that I can't tell her the truth about what's happened to me.

"Well," she says brightly, obviously deciding it's time to change the subject, "it's great to see you again. I remember something in the news about the lymphaticotosis cure. You're well now?"

"Like new."

"You look—terrific. Like you've hardly aged."

"Thanks. Stunted growth. Meds."

"Oh! Well, you don't look particularly stunted. Just young—not that that's a bad thing," she adds. "You really do look great."

Oh, God. There's all this awkwardness between us now.

It hits me—you really *can't* go back. What was I thinking about? Rekindling my relationship with Emma Moder is clearly not in the cards. She's a twenty-six-year-old woman, wearing a *suit*. When I knew Emma, she was all about modern dance and artsy, eccentric clothes.

"Do you still dance?" I ask.

I Was a Teenage Popsicle

She smiles. "When I can. To keep in shape."

"So . . . you didn't go into it professionally?"

She laughs. "Nope. Decided I wanted to buy one of those gorgeous oceanside lofts—which I wouldn't have been able to afford on a dancer's salary. But I do a lot of work for cultural organizations. It's really satisfying, and there's no risk of injury."

"What . . . do you do?" I ask her.

"Public relations," she says.

"PR. Great. That must be fun," I say, feeling really stupid. I don't have a clue what a PR person does. *Because I'm only sixteen!*

Suddenly I hate that I've been frozen, thawed, and brought back to life.

"It is," she says. A few seconds later, obviously feeling as awkward as I do, she says, "Well, it was really good seeing you again, Floe."

I mutter a generic nice-seeing-you-too-and-take-care, and bury my head in my hands on the table when she leaves.

"God," says Taz, "that must have been weird. You guys were close, huh?"

I bring my head up, and lift my arms to find Runt, who's been hovering. Stroking her comforts me, even though I feel nothing, even though she's just a transparent, computer-generated image. "Yeah. It wasn't as mind-blowing with any of your friends?"

Taz shakes his head. "No. I would have told you if it was." He shrugs. "Guess guys are just different."

I smile weakly. "Even artsy Venice Beach types?"

He smiles back. "Even artsy Venice Beach types. Speaking of which—" his voice takes on a let's-change-the-topic-to-cheer-you-up quality— "I asked Sari to join us." He looks at his watch. "She should be here soon."

Huh? I haven't even had a chance to talk to him about Dixon yet, and how we can help him (and, by extension, my parents). This evening is so not working out the way I planned.

I sigh. I'm even more depressed than I was before I came tonight, thanks to that earthshaking meeting with my former best friend, and now I have to watch Taz get all cozy with his new girlfriend.

I didn't know how good I had it when I only had to worry about school, my mean sister, and the possibility of never seeing my parents again.

"Cheer up," Taz orders me. "Sari will have you in stitches, she's so great."

Oh, yeah. I'm so sure seeing Taz flirt with some leggy blond beach girl will completely cheer me up.

Not.

His eyes light up suddenly. "Here she is."

I turn toward the door and instantly feel depressed. It's worse than I even imagined. Sari looks like one of those supermodels who go around wearing really ugly clothes just to taunt normal people. (*Look, I can wear the most hideous stuff and I'll still look better than you!*)

She's supertall and superthin, with fabulous, just-out-of-

I Was a Teenage Popsicle

bed sandy brown hair and sea-blue eyes. She's dressed in ripped jeans, a T-shirt with a hardware store logo, a peace necklace, and flowered rain boots. Very vintage, very hip.

In Venice Beach. In the Valley, I'd be treated like a leper if I walked into school dressed like that.

"Hey, Taz," she says, kissing him on the cheek. She turns to me and smiles brilliantly. "You must be Floe. Taz has told me a lot about you." She knits her brow. "He said you were into vintage, too. That's why I wore this."

I paste a smile on my face. "Oh, I am. Just felt like being different today. Or the same, as it were."

She laughs as she sits down. "You're funny. Taz said you were funny."

Yeah, I'm a regular clown. Taz's funny friend.

I gulp down the rest of my cappuccino and order another one.

"You okay, Floe?" Taz asks.

"Fine," I grind out. "Fabulous."

Going back to my laboratory-cum-bedroom at Sunny's house suddenly isn't looking like such a bad option.

"So Sari, Floe sketches a little, too."

Sketches a little, too? The night before we left the center, I presented Taz with a charcoal drawing I'd worked on for two hours every day since being thawed!

He turns to me. "You should see Sari's comic. It's whack. Go on, Sar, tell—"

Sar?

"—Floe about your comic."

Oh, do, Sari. Please tell me how interesting and talented you are. I'm sure it will make me feel so much better to know that the most beautiful woman in the world is also the most brilliant and fascinating. Go on, I can take it. I'm not feeling the least bit fragile, even though I've just been awakened from a ten-year deep freeze and have barely been making my way in this new world.

What the heck does Taz think he's doing? He seemed so sensitive at the Cryonics Center. Why doesn't he realize I just wanted to talk to him? Why doesn't he seem even remotely concerned about the Dixons? He hasn't even mentioned what's going on at the center, and I told him on the phone that was what I wanted to talk about!

Sari goes on and on about her comic book, which is (surprise, surprise) about a Venice Beach teen and her dating adventures, and I tune her out. Taz excitedly interjects now and then, and I nod politely.

"So, enough about me," she says finally.

You betcha.

"What's *your* thing, Floe?" she asks with a delicate (natch) sip of her espresso.

"Oh, I'm into a lot of things," I say vaguely. "I'm really interested in cryonics right now."

Taz looks alarmed. Good.

"In fact," I continue, "Taz and I have a mutual friend—a scientist who runs a cryonics center."

Sari knits her perfect brow. "Dixon? The guy all over the papers?"

I Was a Teenage Popsicle

Taz nearly chokes on his latte.

“Yes,” I say sweetly. I look directly at Taz. “So, have you heard from Dr. Dixon recently, Taz? I haven’t been able to reach him.”

“No,” he mutters. “I haven’t been able to reach him, either.” He gives me an odd look, and runs his hand through his hair.

Strange. I think I can read him pretty well, and his expression seems to be saying “Sorry,” but there’s also something else there, something I can’t quite decipher.

“Do you . . . help out at the center or something?” Sari asks. She smiles. “Hard to believe Taz has the time, what with all his songwriting. He just wrote the most beautiful song for me.”

Oh, he did, did he?

She looks to Taz for elaboration, but he just sighs and says, “Yeah, we help out at the center.”

Thank God Runt tells me it’s time to meet Sunny out front.

I don’t even say good-bye, just mutter “Gotta go,” and bolt.

I hold it in during the ride, but when I get home, I burst into tears.

“I knew it wasn’t a good idea for you to go there,” Sunny says in the kitchen, sighing. “Can I get you something? Hot chocolate? Tea?”

“No, thanks.” I honk into a tissue. *Did she just offer me a beverage?* “It probably *wasn’t* a good idea for me to go there,” I murmur, sinking into a chair. (Not that you can sink into a chrome chair.) “I saw Emma.”

“Oh, Floe,” Sunny says, sounding stricken.

“Don’t worry, she doesn’t know the truth,” I say, sniffing.

“Oh, honey, I wasn’t thinking about that,” she says. “I was thinking how hard it must have been for you.”

I Was a Teenage Popsicle

Okay, this is weird. It's as if she's suddenly remembered that as my guardian, she's required to offer at least a nominal type 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. "Oh, Floe, 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 her. "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"—I try to keep my voice from breaking—"if I'll ever get used to it."

She reaches over and hugs me again. "Oh, honey, you will. You're doing great at school. And you've already made a friend. You've even gone to the mall with her!"

No, I went to the mall with you, but you ditched me, I think, but don't say.

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 know how to make that?"

She shrugs. "I have all of Mom's old cookbooks."

I smile through my tears. "Sounds great." Sort of. Mom,

the easily distracted *artiste*, inevitably burnt her eco-responsible meals.

Things aren't so bad, I tell myself as I climb the stairs. Yeah, it's upsetting that Taz is dating someone who looks like a supermodel, and that Dixon is unreachable. And my encounter with Emma really shook me up. But I have a sort-of new friend in Halley, 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 Beach 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.



It starts with Sunny inexplicably refusing to give me money for a school trip, at which point I begin to think my initial suspicions about my sister were correct. Unemployed people can't really 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 "sleeping," 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.

I Was a Teenage Popsicle

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 suspiciously.

“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 car jock think he is?

I can’t help myself. “What *did* you guys do to earn enough money to buy this place and live like trust fund puppies?” I ask.

They exchange looks. *Aha!*

“Well?” I prompt.

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. They thought this whole ridiculous cryonics thing 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!"

"So you spent all of Mom and Dad's money?" I say incredulously.

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 mumble. 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 dumbly. "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.

I Was a Teenage Popsicle

Wait till Mom and Dad find out she's blown all their dough—and on a Valley McMansion, 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 says sharply.

"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 pajamas. Like some dumb sitcom character."

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 says, coming over to sit across from me at the table. "But just so you know," she says, "I refused to take money from the Tabers when I left them. And 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—and working in crummy 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. "Pajamas," he explains sheepishly.

We both glare at him.

I Was a Teenage Popsicle

"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, et cetera) 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'm selfish," 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 Beach."

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? Why? 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 of 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.

I Was a Teenage Popsicle

"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 Beach 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."

"Yeah," I mutter. "He's so good, he talked you into stealing from your family. Jeez, Sunny, you'd have been better off with one of the yuppies you dreamed about marrying."

She laughs bitterly. "Right. An orphaned teenager forced to work in a bikini shop has all kinds of opportunities to meet eligible lawyers, right? Anyway, I let him talk me into it. You were all dead, as far as we were concerned, remember?"

"I try to forget," I say dryly.

Her smile turns wan. "Sorry I'm such a loser."

"You're not a loser. But it's gonna be me who saves this family."

"No," she says stubbornly. "I already told you, I won't let you do it. 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, it would be terrible if he couldn't bring back Mom and Dad, or the rest of his clients," Sunny says (calmly, and I instantly realize that the possibility of losing the 'rents is easier for her to deal with because 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'?"

She smiles back. It was a constant refrain with her when she was a kid. "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 lymphaticosis. 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. I'm about to say I'll call Taz, that, together, we'll come up with something. But then I remember I can't call Taz. Clearly, our relationship—friend-

I Was a Teenage Popsicle

ship, whatever—was temporary, and now he's all wrapped up in Venice Beach-y stuff. Not to mention Sari.

I can't lean on him. He's getting on with his life, and I need to get on with mine. Course, it would be nice if he acknowledged that Abe and I needed his help—

Nope. Can't think about that. This is *my* problem. Taz has his parents, and he's living in Venice Beach.

Some frozen zombies have all the luck.

I'm home alone on Saturday because my sister and her husband are, once again, off playing tennis. They seem to have forgotten all about saving the Cryonics Center and earning back Mom and Dad's money.

You'd think they'd be at least a little worried about how they're going to explain the loss of their nest egg to Mom and Dad. And why aren't they worried about their unemployed status? Sunny said "all the money's close to being gone"—which means anything that was left over after the house purchase has slipped through their fingers, too. I guess my new guardians are just masters of denial.

Yeah, Sunny had a moment of humanity after I busted her, but it was just that—a moment. She quickly reverted back to her snotty self.

I Was a Teenage Popsicle

So now they're off to "the club" again. Apparently, everyone in Cactus Hill belongs to "the club," at which, so far as I can gather, complaining about maids and gardeners is the most popular activity, trumping even tennis. I'm sure Sunny, despite her spectacular lack of imagination, has made up an assortment of colorful household staff members so she can partake in this pastime.

So here I am, saddled with Jake—again.

Not that I mind being saddled with Jake. He's a great baby—really easy and happy. (Hard to believe he's the spawn of my ditzy sister and the unemployed car salesman.) And he loves me—when his folks aren't around, that is. When they are, he actually prefers playing with them over me. Hard to believe, I know.

Normally, we would have passed the afternoon playing finger games or reading board books. But today, I'm on a mission.

There's a hoverblading field trip—a phys-ed class outing—coming up at school, and I intend to be prepared. Yeah, I know. Cryonics Center, nest egg, et cetera, but the court case is still a ways off, and it's kinda hard to focus, what with all this other school-related stuff to worry about. You know as well as I do that if you don't perform well on these athletic-type field trips at schools like Cactus Hill, you're instantly demoted to loser status. (Not that I can sink much lower.)

I've rented a *Hoverblading for Beginners* DVD.

"Okay, Jake-y, watch and learn," I murmur, once we're

set up in the basement—unfinished and empty except for one chair, which I've pushed off to the side, and a big-screen TV. (Andrew does like his toys, even though he can't afford them.) Jake is secure in his portable car seat on the side of the room, and I'm sporting an aerodynamic unitard and the blades that Abe did, indeed, let me keep.

I'm patient all through the annoyingly blond blading champion's spiel about taking care to warm up before and after a session. Hey, any tips are appreciated. Who knows, maybe they'll help. That bent-down-low hoverblading stance is much deeper than the standard inline stance. I'm pretty sure that's the problem. On top of being completely out of shape (despite Vin) on account of having been immersed in a vat of liquid nitrogen for ten years, my body is unused to the movements hoverblading calls for.

Blondie's done with her spiel, and she's starting the exercises. First there's a warmup (which, like a good girl, I don't even skip), and then she begins the training exercises.

Which are not all that taxing. Although I do have a hard time listening to all those perky "Four more!"s, and looking at that hot pink unitard. And that constant come-hither look she aims at the camera is *really* irritating. But I stick it out, telling myself these specially formulated exercises are just what I need to prepare me for a kickin' hoverblading session!

When Blondie's done with the exercises, she demonstrates the same routine Abe did for getting into the air. "Now, don't do this your first time out," she warns. "It's a

I Was a Teenage Popsicle

good idea to do the exercises a few weeks in a row before attempting takeoff.”

Hmmm. I've been following her instructions religiously up to this point, but this is one tip I think I'm gonna ignore. After all, I've already tried hoverblading once before—at the center. And Vin *has* gotten me back into semidecent shape. (Ignore the fact that I just told you he didn't get me in good enough shape for hoverblading.) And I *was* an ace blader before being vitrified. Once an athlete, always an athlete, right?

“This is a piece of cake once you've done the exercises a few times!” Blondie exclaims once more.

I quickly repeat a couple of the exercises while she's chatting, and tell myself I've now done the exercises “a few times.”

“Okay, watch this, Jake-y,” I say, determined.

Jake makes some sweet cooing noises in response, and normally, I would go over to give him a big smooch, but I'm totally focused on Blondie, who's repeating those crucial getting-airborne steps.

I take a deep breath, say a silent prayer (not that the universal being could care less about my ability to hoverblade), and do exactly what Blondie did.

To no avail.

I hear her saying, “Keep in mind you might have to try this two or three times before you're successful.”

I cheer up. “Practice makes perfect, Jake-y,” I say, readying myself to try again, and glancing over at him to blow

him a kiss. He gives me a big smile and gurgles. (My own personal cheering section!)

It occurs to me that I could have asked Sunny or Andrew for hoverblading lessons. Not that I'm even sure they own hoverblades. (What am I thinking? Of course they do! They own every gadget they can't afford!)

Then I imagine actually having a lesson with one or both of them and find myself shuddering.

Blondie is by far the lesser of the two evils.

I try again.

Nothing.

"It's okay, she said a few times," I say out loud. "Right, Jake-y?"

He gurgles something that sounds astonishingly like, "Right," and I prepare to go again.

I don't get any further.

I don't get anywhere at all.

I try a fourth time.

And a fifth.

And a sixth.

At which point I take off my blades and nearly hurl them at the screen.

I don't bother with Blondie's cooldown, despite her semi-dire warning about very bad things happening to my muscles if I skip it.

Very bad things have already happened to my muscles—to my whole body.

It's been vitrified.

I Was a Teenage Popsicle

And I don't know if I'll ever be able to do anything right in this strange new world.

I still can't get in touch with Dixon, and I *really* need to talk to him (well, okay, vent), so I decide to use Sunny's baby carrier (a good old-fashioned slinglike contraption—there's some technology you just can't improve on) and take Jake with me to the center. What with all the controversy still surrounding the Dixons (the lawsuit is still all over the news), I'm sure Abe and Bea are holed up there, trying to work out a solution to their problems.

I've found out how to get to Venice Beach by public transit, and though it takes a bunch of buses and ten bucks and a couple hours each way, I'm determined.

I pack up a diaper bag—I'm already an expert—and we set off. Feeling Jake on my chest gives me a warm feeling of contentment. I'm really glad I have him. Even if he loves Sunny and Andrew more than me. (Yeah, yeah, I know. Parents. Still.)

Jake loves the bus ride—partly because Runt is hovering above my shoulder—and coos and gurgles all the way.

When we get off at the center, I stop in my tracks.

The crowd, which was sparse the first time I paid my little visit, when I initially heard about the lawsuit, is enormous now.

A couple I take to be the Cullens are standing on a large, flat rock, and Congressman Dick Jones is standing next to them, talking into a bullhorn.

Bev Katz Rosenbaum

I can't quite make out what he's saying—I'm too far away—but I can tell he's got the crowd on his side. Huge cheers erupt after every one of his sentences.

Jake looks at me.

I look at him.

Somehow, I think the Dixons have enough on their plate. We turn around to go back home.

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Lunch.

“Pita and hummus?” Ashleigh snorts contemptuously.

“Hippie food!” exclaims Michelle Margolis, one of Ashleigh’s acolytes. “Vegetarian cuisine is sooo not about eth stuff anymore.”

“It’s *totally* evolved,” agrees Didi Tompkins, and Ashleigh wanna-be.

“I dunno, it looks pretty good,” Kalel says, giving another interested look.

I’ve decided I’ll definitely go out with him. Not that going out with him will up my pop tent. Ashleigh will make sure said P.Q. goes down.

But as a Venice Beach freak, I don’t

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"Nope. He's completely different from what I'm used to."
From what I stupidly got used to. "But I need a change."
Who knows? Maybe I'll end up having a great time with
Kalel. Maybe I'll end up being shocked by his secret depths.
But probably not.
I look at Halley. "God, I said yes to tick off Ashleigh, but
I didn't even think about you. Does it bother you that I'r
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She looks down at her veggie dog as she answers. "I
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“It’s *totally* evolved,” agrees Didi Tompkins, another Ashleigh wanna-be.

“I dunno, it looks pretty good,” Kalel says, giving me another interested look.

I’ve decided I’ll definitely go out with him if he asks. Not that going out with him will up my popularity quotient. Ashleigh will make sure said P.Q. goes down. Way down.

But as a Venice Beach freak, I don’t much care about

popularity. Being popular is infinitely less satisfying than ticking off the queen of the school.

"I like pita and hummus, too," Halley says, flashing me a quick smile.

Wow! First her help at the Skedpet store, now this. Could it be Halley has RFP—Real Friend Potential—after all?

Nah. Unless Ashleigh drops dead (and that's unlikely—she's one of those annoyingly healthy-looking girl-next-door types whose outward loveliness masks her inner witch), there's not much of a chance of me getting any closer to Halley.

Still, it's nice to know she'll stick up for me when Ashleigh disses me. Which is often.

"So, Floe, how would ya like to hit the mall with me tonight?" Kael asks casually.

Ashleigh nearly chokes on her Mexican (isn't *that* ethnic?) salad, prepared, of course, by the maid, about whom even Ashleigh constantly complains, being a tennis-club member in training.

I smile at him and say, "Sure. What time?"

"How 'bout I pick you up around six?" He rolls his eyes. "That way, we'll have a chance to finish that math stuff for tomorrow."

Ha. I'm going to need a month to finish that math stuff. I just bat my eyelashes a little and say, "Sure. Sounds great."

He stands and grins. "Excellent. I'll get your address later. Gotta go. Ball practice."

He does not mean basketball. He's talking about a new

I Was a Teenage Popsicle

and thoroughly repulsive game called smashball, which I won't even attempt to explain here. Primarily because I don't understand it. Well, I understand one thing about it. It's the single most violent game ever invented. And that's saying something when hockey still exists.

"Right. Smash 'em up good."

He laughs. "You're funny." He walks away, his own group of followers trailing him and laughing, too. I hear him say, "Smash 'em up good. She kills me."

As soon as he's out of range, Ashleigh's Skedpet (apparently some new rare breed of dog, though it looks suspiciously like a mutt to me) announces cheer practice. Saved! She'd looked like she was going to let me have it, but now she clamps her mouth shut and stands abruptly. Not even looking at me, she says, "Come on, girls. Cheer practice."

All except Halley stand to go with her. Halley says, "Be there in a sec."

Ashleigh tosses her head, and she and the wanna-bes head out of the cafeteria in a line, their steps perfectly in sync.

I watch them. "Do you think they practice that?"

Halley shakes her head. "You really don't care what she thinks, do you?"

"As a matter of fact, no."

She smiles. "You don't even like Kalel, do you?"

I shrug. "He's okay."

"Not exactly the Venice Beach type."

An image of Taz fills my mind, but I push it away.

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“Nope. He’s completely different from what I’m used to.” From what I stupidly *got* used to. “But I need a change.” Who knows? Maybe I’ll end up having a great time with Kalel. Maybe I’ll end up being shocked by his secret depths.

But probably not.

I look at Halley. “God, I said yes to tick off Ashleigh, but I didn’t even think about you. Does it bother you that I’m going? I’ll tell him no if it does.”

She looks down at her veggie dog as she answers. “I told you, I wouldn’t go out with him because of Ashleigh.”

I hesitate before saying, “Halley, you’re not like them. You have this great individual spirit that you’re sublimating.” I’m vaguely aware that I sound like a holographic health teacher, but I press on. “You shouldn’t let Ashleigh control your life.”

“I’m not letting her control my life. I’m a good friend,” she protests. She tosses her head, à la Ashleigh. “Anyway, you just got here. You don’t even *know* these people. *You’re* the one making snap judgments.”

They judged first, I think. I just smile, shake my head, and say, “Yeah, okay, Halley. You tell yourself whatever you want.”

She sighs. “Just think about what you’re doing, okay? If you want to be happy here, ticking off Ashleigh Jones is not the best idea.”

“Kalel doesn’t seem to care what she thinks.”

“Kalel is the most popular guy in tenth grade. He doesn’t have to care what she thinks.”

I Was a Teenage Popsicle

I knit my brow. "Why did he ask me out, anyway? I'm no Ashleigh."

"No, you're not." She looks at me and says, "And despite what I just said, I'm coming to think that's a good thing."

Okay, maybe Halley *does* have RFP!

She pauses, then says, "There's something else I didn't tell you about Ashleigh."

"What?" I ask, curious.

"Her father is Dick Jones. The congressman."

Holy crap! Her father's the guy *supporting the Cullens!*

Halley shifts in her chair. "She's been known to have him, well, go after people."

I laugh. "Go after people? You mean he has his lackeys eliminate people his popular daughter doesn't like?"

"Floe, it's not a joke. She's perfectly capable of inventing lies about people's families, getting him to investigate them. She can make a lot of trouble for people. More than your run-of-the-mill high school queen."

"She uses her power for evil," I say.

I see Halley smile slightly.

Given what I now know, I realize it's probably not a good idea for me to tick her off. Daddy Dearest could start poking around and find out about my frozen past . . .

What am I thinking? "Has she ever actually done it? Do you have an example?" I demand.

"Well, no, but she's always threatening."

"Threatening," I say pointedly. "Not doing. She controls

people through fear. Her dad would probably laugh at her if she came to him and asked him to investigate somebody." At least I hope he would.

"So," she says after a moment, "you're going to go out with Kalel."

"Like I said, I'm more worried about offending *you* than Ashleigh Jones."

She shakes her head. "I told you, I can't ever go out with him because of Ashleigh."

Now it's my turn to shake my head. "And I told *you*, you deserve to live your own life."

"Tell you what? Why don't you live it for me?" She smiles. "Call me when you get home." She scribbles her number on a napkin. "What are you going to wear?"

I think about it. "Some old-time vintage outfit. That oughta really freak them out." I'm sure Ashleigh and her buddies will be trailing us at the mall.

She grins. "You know, I'm starting to think you may be on to something with this finger-to-the-world stuff."

She excuses herself to go to cheer practice, and I spend the remainder of lunch reading *Hoverblading for Morons*.



“You can’t go,” Sunny says flatly while making shortbread cookies in the kitchen. (This is my sister now: meatloaf and shortbread cookies. Not an ounce of Venice Beach left in her.) “Jake’s napping. I need you to babysit. Andrew’s tennis partner just canceled, so we’re going to play each other.”

“Sunny, please, I’ve been sitting for Jake so much!” I’ve already done the five times I owed her for driving me to the Havajava Café that time, and more.

“Floe, that’s what older siblings *do*,” she says patiently.

“I’m not his *sibling!*” I explode. I close my eyes. “Look, Sunny, I love Jake, I really do, he’s adorable, but I’m his aunt, not his sister.”

“While I’m your guardian, you’re his *de facto* sister,” she says.

"*De facto*," I say. "Where'd you learn that? At the club?" She glares at me. "I'm not even going to dignify that with a response."

I sigh. "I'm sorry. But, Sunny, do you really not see how unfair you're being? Yes, you're my guardian"—I choke a little over the word—"but you have to realize that normal parents and kids talk about these issues, compromise. Maybe we should work out a system of some kind, make certain nights babysitting nights."

After a moment, she says, "I'll think about it."

"Great. Thank you. Now, about tonight . . ."

"Still no," she says.

"But why?" I explode.

"Aside from the fact that I have plans, it's a *date*," she says in that annoyingly patient tone. As if *I'm* being the unreasonable one here.

"And that's significant because . . . ?"

"Floe, you've never *been* on a date!"

I stare. "Well, no, but it's about time, don't you think?"

She looks at me again. "I'm not sure you're mature enough."

"Oh, for Pete's sake, Sunny, I'm not sixteen, I'm twenty-six!"

"Not really, because you were vivified—"

"Vitrified," I grind out.

"Whatever," she says.

"Sixteen is more than old enough. And speaking of maturity, may I remind you that it was you and your

I Was a Teenage Popsicle

husband”—I kind of spit the word out—“who stole all of Mom and Dad’s money, and don’t appear to be doing a thing to earn it back!”

She gives me a frosty look. “Andrew and I have been brainstorming for some time now.”

“Oh, brainstorming. That’s great.” I fold my arms. “Tell me, what have you come up with so far?”

“It’s a long process,” she says.

“Mmm. Any job prospects?”

“We’re not at that stage, Floe.” Her tone is so patronizing, I feel like screaming. “When you’re older, you’ll understand that there are a series of steps you have to undertake before you begin to look for a job.”

“Like what? Get your hair and nails done?”

“Well, yes, but that comes later—before the interviews.”

Oh, Lord save me.

“After the *brainstorming* comes the *networking*.”

“So you’re *networking* with people from the club?”

“That’s correct.”

“While playing tennis,” I say.

“Exactly.”

“And that’s why you’ve been going to the club so much.”

“Yes,” she says, smiling.

“You’re not applying for jobs there.”

She snorts. “Don’t be ridiculous.”

“It would certainly be convenient, you’re there so often.”

She rolls her eyes. “We’re not about to apply for jobs at the club, Floe.”

“Okay. How ’bout somewhere closer to home. The community center?”

“You’re being ridiculous on so many levels, I’m not even going to comment.”

“Ah, right. You’re still at the networking stage. Heaven forbid you should do anything so concrete as to apply for a job. And at such places!” I feign horror by bringing my hands up to my face. Then I cross my arms. “So where have all your networking discussions gotten you so far?”

She throws down her mixing spoon and puts her hands on her hips. “Are you prepared to talk seriously about this?”

“Most definitely.”

“Well, we’ve let our influential friends know that we may be searching for employment sometime in the future.”

“You’ve let your influential friends know that you may be searching for employment sometime in the future,” I repeat.

“Floe, we’re not sixteen,” she says impatiently. “We’re not going to just walk into stores and fill out applications!” She goes back to mixing furiously.

“And you think your club friends are going to hire you for some big-time executive position when you have no qualifications?” I ask incredulously.

“They might,” she says.

I shake my head. “You’re deluding yourself. You and Andrew are better off talking to Ann and Mike Parsons—their snotty doubles partners—“about jobs at their hotel.”

I Was a Teenage Popsicle

“Well, we’re not going to do that, Floe,” she says, pulling a cookie sheet out of a cupboard and slamming it down on the counter. “And it’s not because I don’t care, though I know that’s what you think. I *do* care. Not that anyone cared about *me*, way back when.”

Great. We’re back to that again.

I sigh. “Sunny, we’ve already been through this. I know I’m not the only one who’s been through a lot. And I’m truly sorry for everything you went through. Because of what happened to me, you had to move to Marshland and your whole life was turned upside down. Then you lost us all and were forced to live with strangers. That must have been *really* hard. I wish I could go back in time and make it better, but I can’t.”

Sunny drops into a chair. “You know what, I really don’t want to discuss this,” she says tiredly. “I don’t want to see you for a while, either.”

Oh.

“Does that mean . . .”

“Go on your stupid date,” she mutters.

I smile. “Thanks, sis. You’re a doll.”

Kalel's older brother Janusz (another hunk) drives us to Cactus Hill Square. He's got a small sports car—which he wastes no time telling me he's planning to trade in for a ten-million-dollar hover car once he's made his first billion. (Apparently, only Bill Gates owns one at this point in time.)

“Interesting outfit,” Kalel says, raising his eyebrows, when he first sees me in my Sid Vicious tee, leather mini, fishnets, and black Converse sneakers.

But he's nice enough while we walk around the mall. Doesn't ditch me when I go to the bathroom or anything.

We start out at the food court. My veggie sub tastes like manna from heaven. (Sunny forgot all about that promise to try braised tofu. She's still insisting on making meatloaf and such.)

I Was a Teenage Popsicle

“Guess you like it,” Kalel says, grinning at me.

I nod enthusiastically while I chew, and when I’ve swallowed, say, “Yeah, I’ve been living with my sister. I’m a vegetarian, and she’s a meat eater.”

He lifts his eyebrows midchew. (He got a Chinese combo platter.) “You live with your sister?”

Whoops.

Crap. Now I’ll have to explain. “Yeah,” I say. “My parents are . . . gone.” I figure that could mean on vacation, so if perchance (please God) they do come back sometime soon, I’m covered.

“Oh, wow, I’m sorry,” Kalel says, sounding so sincere I feel like a piece of doggie doo-doo.

I just nod.

He gets the hint and changes the subject. “So, whaddya think of Cactus Hill?”

“The place or the school?” I ask, hoping he’ll change the subject yet again, and I won’t have to answer.

He grins. “The school.”

“Um, it’s okay, I guess,” I say vaguely. I don’t want to tear it down, in case he loves it, but I don’t want to sing its praises to the heavens, either.

“I heard you lived in Venice Beach before. That must have been cool.”

“Yeah, it was.” With a sinking feeling, I realize that this date—if that’s what it is—has nowhere to go but down. I can’t say too much, given my circumstances (he’d freak if he knew I was twenty-six!), and with every question, Kalel’s

just going to cement the boring impression I'm sure he's already gotten of me.

"Did you go to Venice Beach Alternative?" he asks.

"Yup," I say. Nice, Floe. Real witty.

"Know Pete Armstrong?"

"Nope," I say quickly, hoping (again) he'll get the hint and change the topic.

But he persists. "Saskia Tomlinson?"

"'Fraid not," I mutter.

He knits his brow. "They're our age, and they're both pretty well known."

"I'm pretty self-involved," is all I can come up with by way of response. I can only hope Kalel won't make this terrible date a story he gets laughs out of for years.

Finally, he leaves the subject of people he knows at Venice Beach. "So, whaddya like to do?" he asks.

Okay, this one I can answer. "Oh, you know, the usual Venice Beach stuff. I'm a whiz on inline skates."

He gives me a funny look. "You mean hoverblades."

Of course. I do believe I've blocked out the whole hoverblading thing.

"How high can you fly?" he asks after swallowing a hunk of tofu. "I can go about two feet now. I'm better than my brother," he says proudly. "But it's harder if you didn't learn with the hover mechanism from the start."

"Right," I say.

Long, awkward pause.

I Was a Teenage Popsicle

He clears his throat. It's official. I'm not the fun, exciting gal he thought I was. Well, I am, only I can't let him know it.

Oh, Kalel, I think, if only you knew how exciting I really am—

You'd bolt from the mall so fast, my zombie head would spin.

"Wanna hit some stores?" he says unenthusiastically.

"Sure!" I try to say it energetically, but I can tell it's too little too late.

There's a big glass-topped aquarium on the floor in front of Macy's that houses several colorful koi fish, and I ooh and aah over them, but this seems only to embarrass Kalel.

"They've been here forever," he says. "The whole thing's looking kinda tired, don't you think?"

"I like them," I say, aiming for a bright tone, and sounding like the nerdiest sixteen-year-old girl ever.

We wander halfheartedly through some stores. My mood brightens briefly when I discover The Body Shop still carries vanilla perfume oil, my signature scent, but falls again when Kalel asks me what I think of the new, inexplicably tasseled, gold hoverblade outfits in the window of The Sport Shop. They look like bad figure skating outfits, circa 2006. I mumble something incomprehensible.

I've been trying to ignore the pointed stares I've been getting from shoppers all night. But when we bump into Ashleigh and some of her gang (told you they'd be here), I get more than mere stares.

Smirking, Ashleigh says, "Look, girls, it's the bride of Frankenstein. You starring in the remake, arty girl?"

"Is that the best insult you can come up with, Ashleigh—'arty girl'?" I say.

"Aw, c'mon, girls, don't fight," Kael says.

Ashleigh leans toward Kael conspiratorially and says, "Kal, everyone's looking at you. Going out with her is *not* doing anything for your rep." With that helpful bit of advice, she gives him a wink and sashays off.

And then, thankfully, it's time to meet Kael's brother and motor home.

In silence.



The phone rings. It's Taz. "I tried you earlier," he says. "You were out."

"Yup," I say cautiously. Why is he calling? How am I supposed to act? Much as I'd love to blurt out every little thing on my mind, I'm still hurt by his behavior that night when he brought Sari along to our rendezvous. And I'm still determined not to lean on him.

"Where were you?"

Is it my imagination, or is he trying really hard not to sound like a macho jerk?

"Oh . . . just out," I say. "At the mall."

"Ah. Buy anything? Another unitard?" he teases.

"Ha ha," I say, still not sure where all this is going.

"Who did you go with?" he asks casually.

I Was a Teenage Popsicle

"A friend from school," I answer carefully. (Yup. Still confused.)

"That girl you were telling me about?" he says.

"Nah, somebody else," I say. He couldn't possibly be trying to find out whether I went with a guy, could he?

"You went with a guy," he states.

Holy crap! He *was* trying to find out whether it was a guy! "Yeah, but it was a washout," I say quickly.

"It was a *date*?" he says incredulously.

Whoops. I'm still ticked off at him, and still don't want to lean, but if there's a chance he wants to rekindle our budding romance . . .

No, Floe, I tell myself firmly. Be strong.

"No," I say quickly. (Okay, so I'm a wimp.) "Not at all. We were just . . . shopping."

"Just shopping," he repeats.

"Just shopping. C'mon, Taz, don't be stupid. I didn't give you a hard time about Sari. Don't give me a hard time about Kalel."

"Kalel?" He cracks up. "Like Superman?"

"They're big on those names up here." I sigh. "Kalel, Janusz, Lex . . ."

"Listen," he says, "about the other night—"

Nooo. Can't talk about the other night. Don't want to hear about how great Sari is. Too much pain. "Sorry, can't—gotta go. Talk to you soon." *Not.*

And with that, I hang up, sighing again. Life was so much easier when we were two freshly thawed zombies.

13

It's the morning of the hoverblading field trip. I can only pray that something clicks, and I figure out how to fly.

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

They do.

Within about ten minutes of our arrival at the Cactus Hill Hoverblading Arena, a humungous and (I have to grudgingly admit) very hip space, everybody is in the air except me.

I take a few moments to try to center myself. (It's a Venice Beach thing.) Then I give it a whirl, keeping Blondie's instructions in mind.

And I fall on my rear (again).

"You okay, Floe?" Kael asks.

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

I Was a Teenage Popsicle

“Yeah, sure,” Ashleigh says, rolling her eyes. Not coincidentally, she’s right beside Kalel. They’ve both just touched down. My humiliation is complete. “Thought you Venice Beachers were all about the blading.”

I can’t even answer her. I just glare.

“Yeah, what’s up with that?” Halley 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?” Halley 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, Halley. 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, I 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?”

Thank God 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.”

“Yeah, yeah,” I say.

She grins. “So are you any good?”

I’m confused. “You know I’m not.”

“I mean at art.” She pulls a sketchpad and pencil out of her purse, and shoves them in my direction. “Draw something.”

“Uh, okay.”

I look over at Ashleigh and Kaleb and quickly sketch out a cartoony thing, with Ashleigh as Catwoman, digging her claws into Kaleb as Superman.

Halley laughs at the finished product. “Perfect. You are good.”

“Good at what?” a voice says.

Uh-oh.

I grab the pad and hold it behind my back.

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

I Was a Teenage Popsicle

"Nothing," Halley says in a bored tone. "We were 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. "That's it, Ryan. You're finished at this school."

"Oh, really?" I say, trying to keep my voice steady. How did it come to this? "A tenth-grader has that much power?"

"You'd be surprised."

"Aw, c'mon, Ash, relax," Halley says. "She's sorry, right, Floe?"

"Yeah, I'm sorry," I mutter.

Ashleigh turns her slits on Halley. "You said it was perfect."

Crap, I think. Now I've dragged Halley down with me.

"We were talking about her drawing technique," she says.

Ashleigh doesn't respond for a second, then she says to Halley, "You coming back?"

"In a sec."

Ashleigh whips her ponytail around and stomps back to the hoverblading floor.

"Weird," I say. "She knew that was bull about the drawing technique. Why didn't she excommunicate you?"

"You know," Halley says thoughtfully, "there seems to have been a shift in the last little while . . . since you showed up at Cactus Hill."

"Me?" I say, surprised.

"Yeah. The Kael thing was pretty big."

"Huh. For a day," I say.

She shrugs. "Yeah, well, it may not have worked out for you guys, but I don't think you realize what a big deal it was that he asked somebody else out when Ash had made it known she wanted to get back together. She's been coming off as kind of desperate. It's confusing the heck out of the tenth-grade population."

I grin. "Good."

She nods. "Yeah. It actually is nice to see Ashleigh Jones have to deal with the stuff the rest of us have to deal with all the time."

Rejection, she means. I realize she's thinking about Kael.

"And of course," I venture, "you've been talking to me a lot, too." Which is extra nice of her, considering she has that gigundo crush on Superman's namesake.

She smiles. "What can I say? You're growing on me, kid."

I look over at Ashleigh, who's whispering to a couple of the wanna-bes and glaring at me.

"It's not going to be a fun morning," I say.

"Nope," Halley says. "It's not."



There's even more fun in store for me back at school in the afternoon.

The wanna-bes engage in a whole harassment campaign. Of course, Ashleigh doesn't actually participate in the fun

I Was a Teenage Popsicle

goings-on. Heaven forbid she should actually be caught doing something wrong and be punished. Oh, no. She's much too wily for that, much too much like her dad the politician. She's all about getting her minions to do her dirty work for her.

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

- “bump” into me a number of times in the hallway (I can only be glad it's the future, when course materials are all online and my arms aren't filled with textbooks)
- trip me a number of times in same hallway
- “accidentally” spill colored water, vinegar, and baking soda all over me in chemistry class so that a lovely odor clings to me all day, and the sweater I used all of my piddly allowance to buy is ruined
- make a point of laughing loudly at me, pointing at me, spilling food and drink on me at lunch, and generally giving the entire Cactus Hill Secondary School population the impression that having me come within ten feet of a student is akin to contracting a venereal disease

Even more depressing, I actually find myself wanting—for the second time since I've been back—to go home to the spaceship.

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, the 'rents.

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 Cullens.

The constituency office is a big room with a bunch of

I Was a Teenage Popsicle

desks—at which are sitting a bunch of young politicians answering phones, which are ringing nonstop.

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 Cullens 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 between an old-fashioned business suit and the 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 Cullens, in contrast to Jones, are old and tired looking, dressed in drab suits that don't attempt any nod to current fashion.

Jones starts to say good-bye to the Cullens, 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 Cullens.

"Uh, okay," he says, glancing at them. Mr. Cullen 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 Cullens 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—” I turn to the Cullens “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.”

“Well, Floe”—he bestows an even creepier smile on me—“as I said, I’m sure they’re perfectly nice, and I’m sure

I Was a Teenage Popsicle

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, Z30, and F9B."

"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 tenth 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 ace science student, Floe."

He seems to expect a response, so I say, "Not really, sir." *It's just that you're a jerk and haven't even bothered to try to find out what they're actually doing over there at the Venice Beach 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—not even relatives of the preserved—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. Adventurous and spunky as I am, 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

I Was a Teenage Popsicle

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 Cullens. 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. Cullen.

"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. Cullen says. "Lung cancer."

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

Nope, I can't blame the Cullens 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.

Bev Katz Rosenbaum

“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 cheer practices and such.”

He looks at me as if trying to decide whether I’m being facetious.

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

Great. That’s definitely code-speak for *Watch it*.

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

So much for saving the center and the 'rents. That night, Andrew wants to check out a new-car dealership in Venice Beach, so I hitch a ride to a café called Hole in the Wall, where I used to go to hear great up-and-coming musicians. Good music always makes me feel better.

To my delight, the Hole looks exactly the same. Like a, um, hole in the wall.

Less crowded, though.

And actually, now that my eyes are adjusting to the light, I can see it's looking a lot more worse for wear. It always had a slightly shabby, disreputable look; now, it just looks depressing.

And the people in the club are different, too. Less like independent spirits than . . . bag ladies.

I'm about to sneak out when a tired-looking, fiftyish waitress accosts me at my table. "What can I get you?" she asks.

I can't leave.

Sighing, I say, "Just a fresh-squeezed orange-raspberry juice. Thanks."

"No problem," she says. "And Jem will be right out."

"Jem?" I say.

"Yeah, she's great. Does Jewel covers."

Covers? That doesn't sound too hip. There must be another music café that's overtaken the Hole. I look out the window. Sure enough, directly across the street is something called Caf A. Unitard-clad teens are packed into it, and I can see a few people playing electronic guitars on a stage.

Hmmm. Odd that there are so many unitard-clad kids in Venice Beach.

Or is it? I remember back to my field trip from the Cryonics Center. Even the vintage stores were filled with 'tards.

Bea said vintage—real vintage—was still hot in the Beach, but maybe things were just starting to change when she did her field research.

The waitress brings me my drink. "What's with that place?" I say, gesturing over to Caf A.

She lifts her eyebrows. "You don't know about it? It's the hottest place in the Beach."

"It looks so—"

"Suburban? Mega store-ish?" She sighs. "You bet. They're all startin' to move in."

I Was a Teenage Popsicle

“Wow,” I say, confused. Taz had left me with a completely different impression of modern-day Beach life.

“Yeah.” She smiles wanly. “Enjoy your drink. It may be the last fresh-squeezed juice you drink in the Beach.”

I stare. “But I was down here not long ago and had lunch at that organic café by the vintage store—”

“Yeah, that whole strip is going out of business.”

“I can’t believe it,” I murmur.

She shrugs. “It’s a new world.”

“But Venice Beach—”

“Was always different. We’re still a few beats behind the times, but just a few.”

Huh.

She smiles at me, as if to offer comfort, and says, “Hey, there’ll always be old and unusual stuff down here—just not as much as before.”

“But it’ll still be different than a place like, say, Cactus Hill, right?” I say, a little desperately. *Everything* can’t change on me . . .

She gives me an odd look. “Yeah, sure.” And she walks away.

To escape, is my guess.

Just then, a woman—presumably Jem—comes on to the rickety stage at the front of the room.

Jem looks like a sixty-year-old Jewel.

And she sings like a seventy-year-old Jewel.

And plays the guitar like a two-year-old Jewel.

But as there are only three of us in the audience, I feel compelled to stay for the whole set.

Especially since Jem aims dagger glances at anyone who looks as though he or she might up and leave.

I hear someone come in midway through one of the songs and I desperately want to turn my head to take a look (just for something else to do besides watch Jem—which is quite painful), but I don't dare, for fear that Jem will stop playing and accuse me of not paying attention.

Her “set” is endless.

Though I do find one of Jem's two original songs mildly interesting, given what I've just found out. It's called “Caf A.” (“Caf A, hope you decay, like Dorian Gray . . .”)

It's all downhill from there. I find myself obsessed with the pattern in the peeling wallpaper behind Jem's head, which I am free to study while still looking as if I am intently watching her.

Finally, she stops singing. “I'm just taking a short break,” she says threateningly.

When she heads for the bathroom, I scramble up and grab my bag.

And see Taz.

Sitting alone at a table.

He was the mystery entrant.

There's no way I can get out without saying hi.

I take a deep breath and walk over to his table. “Hey,” I say brightly.

I Was a Teenage Popsicle

He nearly chokes on his smoothie. “Floe! What are you doing here?”

I shrug. “Felt nostalgic.”

He smiles—kind of sadly. “Not quite the same, is it?”

“Not so much, no.” I gesture over to Caf A. “You been over there?”

“Uh, not really my scene.”

“Yeah, I know,” I say. “So, the area’s changing, huh?”

He shrugs. “Yeah, a bit. Not much.”

You wish, I think. Why aren’t you telling me the truth, Taz?

Awkward pause.

“So, how are you?” I ask.

“Great. I’m great. You?”

“Great,” I echo.

“That’s . . . great,” he says.

“How’s the family?” I ask.

“Great.” He smiles slightly, finally acknowledging the ridiculousness of this conversation. “They just took jobs with a big magazine publisher.”

“Really? Why?”

I know darn well why. Because zine publishers can’t afford to live in a place like this new Venice Beach.

But all Taz says is, “They wanted a change. How’s Sunny?”

“Great.”

“How are things at school?”

Aside from the fact that I’m the mean girl’s favorite tar-

get, and her father wants me dead? (I think.) Just peachy.

“Great. You?”

“Great.”

We seem to have regressed to our three-year-old vocabularies.

“How’s Sarah?” I ask.

“Sari,” he corrects.

“Right,” I say.

“She’s . . . great.”

So why is his mouth turning into a line?

And why is he looking over at Caf A?

Could it be that Sari’s over there with the unitard-clad crowd? Could it be she’s gotten tired of playing millennium-era hippie with Taz?

“Do you wanna sit down?” Taz asks.

“Oh—no.” I lower my voice. “I want to escape before Jem comes back.”

Now he smiles a real smile—one of his sexy specials. “Gotcha.”

But then Jem emerges from the bathroom and glares at me.

Taz laughs. “Busted.”

Sighing, I sit.

While Jem is getting ready for her next set (a process which appears to involve a lot of deep breathing), Taz and I smile awkwardly at one another.

“So everything’s great?” I confirm, making direct eye contact.

I Was a Teenage Popsicle

He gazes beyond my eyes, not quite at them. "Oh, yeah. Big time."

Right. And Jem is going to win a Grammy.

"And everything's great with you," he says.

"Oh, sure."

Now he stares intently at me.

But I'm gazing beyond his eyes, not quite at them.

Unable to come up with any more brilliant ideas to save the center (not that going to talk to Jones was a brilliant idea, exactly), I decide to visit a sports psychologist about the hoverblading thing.

I can hear you laughing.

Trust me when I tell you this is no joke. I'm going to get the hang of this if it kills me.

And it probably will.

And this time I'll be dead for good, cuz there ain't no way Sunny's gonna freeze me.

Back to the sports psychologist. I remember a guy from VBA who was a couple years ahead of me in school who competed at a really high level and was always raving about

I Was a Teenage Popsicle

his. (If I'd lived and gone on to compete at that level—as if!—I'd have used one, too.)

When I actually remember the guy's name (Dr. Lawrence Tanz), I look him up—weird, he's moved to Cactus Hill—and make an appointment.

His office is in (what else) a nearby strip mall. He sure looks the part, I think as he ushers me into his office. Very motivational speakerish. Tanned, white teeth, et cetera.

“So, Floe,” he says, reading the sheet I've filled out, most of which remains blank because I can't very well apprise him of my true medical history.

His brow wrinkles when he notices. “I guess you don't remember when you contracted all these childhood diseases. We'll have you take this home so someone else can fill it out.”

No one else at my house is gonna remember, either, I think, but don't say.

Putting the paper aside, Dr. Tanz turns his thousand-watt smile on me and says, “What can I do for you today, Floe?”

“Hoverblading,” I say. “I can't seem to get the hang of it.”

He leans back in his chair. “That's not exactly uncommon.”

“Well, the thing is, I used to be a great inline skater—even competed at a low level—so I don't get why I'm having such a problem.”

He looks at me. “What's odd is that someone your age was even involved in inline skating. It was already sort of

passé when you grew up. I guess your parents were really into it.”

“Uh, yeah,” is all I say.

He leans forward and puts his elbows on his desk, steeping his fingers. “How did it make you feel when your friends were out hoverblading and you were made to inline skate?”

Oh, jeez. I can’t tell him he’s on the completely wrong track, and now we’re going to have to go through some Freudian baloney, have me work through some trauma that never happened.

He leans back again. “Hard to put it into words, isn’t it? Maybe you can think about it for next time. Your anger and resentment is obviously blocking you from putting your all into learning how to hoverblade.”

Wrong again, I think.

“Fortunately, you won’t have to wait until you’ve worked through those feelings of shame and embarrassment to improve your hoverblading technique.”

Thank God.

“Even people who haven’t experienced what you have develop blockages. There are mental exercises that can help.”

Yes! That’s what I’m talkin’ about! This is exactly the type of thing Jaycee used to rave about!

“Have you been feeling stressed out, Floe?”

“Yes,” I say, relieved. Of course! Why didn’t I think of that! I’m stressed! You would be, too, if you had to deal

I Was a Teenage Popsicle

with being brought back to life ten years after being frozen, living in a new place, being taken care of by your younger-but-now-older, sister, and having to deal with a whole new world! Everyone knows you can't achieve anything, sports-wise, if you're tense! You have to be cool, relaxed.

"Sports psychologists used to think that mental relaxation was the ultimate goal."

Exactly!

"Now we know differently."

We do?

"Now we try to harness that stress to our advantage!"

Ah!

"The more stress, the better!"

"Um, Doc, to tell you the truth, I'm not sure I can handle any more stress."

He leans forward again, and suddenly he has a dangerous look in his eyes. "Of course you can, Floe. Embrace the stress. Love the stress."

Wow. I thought I left nutbars like this back in Venice Beach.

He leaps up and jumps over his desk.

I want to go home, I think, even if home is a spaceship inhabited by my shallow sister and her doofus husband.

He grabs my hands and forces me out of my chair. "Work with me, Floe," he says with the zeal of a cult leader. "Embrace the stress with me! Go crazy!"

With those words, he proceeds to shake his head back and forth and up and down, while jumping and flinging his

arms around. His eyes are bugging out, and he's lolling his tongue around the outside of his mouth.

He looks like he's having a fit.

"Floee, embrace the stress with me!"

"Um, I don't—"

He grabs my hands again and throws them up and down.
"Go nuts!"

I jump a little bit to make him happy.

"I'm not happy, Floe! You're not becoming one with your stress!"

"I want to become one with my hoverblades," I shout, because he's wearing these shoes with hard soles that are making an awful racket, what with the jumping and all.

"You will!" he says. "I promise!"

He promises, huh?

Okay, I think. If he promises.

So I start jumping like a spastic, and continue this way for several minutes.

"Should I be feeling something?" I say, panting. "Other than tired?"

He laughs and stops jumping. "Tell me how you feel." He taps his head. "Here."

"Um, I don't feel anything, actually. Guess all that physical activity relaxed me, emptied my mind."

"No!" he says.

No?

"You embraced your stress! You need to become shaky and off balance before you try to hoverblade!"

I Was a Teenage Popsicle

That doesn't sound at all right to me.

"You should be taking supplements—all natural, don't worry about it—that make you feel similarly shaky and off balance!"

"Like energy drinks and stuff?" I ask doubtfully. I never much liked what caffeine did to me.

"Exactly!" he says.

"Um, okay," I say. I'm still doubtful, but I'm willing to try anything. This guy's got an autographed picture of a big hoverblading star behind his desk, so I assume he knows what he's talking about.

Course, there have always been doctors associated with dumb fads. Back when I was sixteen the first time, Beverly Hills sidewalks were littered with the bodies of females fainting from "medically approved" no-carb diets.

Still, I'm willing to try anything.

I leave with a bottle full of giant brown pills.

"Hey, Taz," I say quickly on the phone later that night, "it's me, Floe? So, listen, I was just staring out my window and I was wondering if you were seeing the same stars in the sky there as I'm seeing here. Have you ever wondered about that? If you're somewhere else, do you have a better view of some constellations than someone who's somewhere else—"

"Floe," he mutters groggily. "It's two o'clock in the morning."

"Yeah, I know. I'm really sorry, I couldn't sleep, and I

really have no one else to talk to. So anyway, about the constellations—”

“Floe.” He sounds awake now. “Are you on something?”

“Don’t be ridiculous. No one does drugs anymore.” Thanks to those plastinated cadavers of dead teens that can be found in virtually every doctor’s office. “They’re just some all-natural things Dr. Tanz gave me—”

“Dr. Tanz? The sports psychologist?”

“Yeah, the one that guy Jaycee used. Do you know him? What a neat guy, huh—”

“Listen, Floe, don’t take any more of those pills. They’re pure caffeine. They’ll really screw up your system. Word is, the guy went a little crazy after his wife died.”

I’m only jittery, not high, so this actually makes sense to me.

“Oh,” I say.

“Sorry,” he mumbles, sleepy again.

“Don’t be sorry. I’m sorry for waking you. I’ll let you go back to sleep.” I put the phone down gently.

I spend the rest of the night staring out my window at the stars. And drumming my fingers against the windowsill—darn caffeine.

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.

Having Emma Moder as my best friend way back when was a definite plus in terms of learning how to dance. 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, festooned with red ribbons and balloons. It's still no VBA, but even I have to admit it actually looks nice.

I head for the punch bowl, and—too late—see Dick Jones standing in front of it.

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. “What—are you doing here?”

“Chaperoning, of course.”

“Don't teachers do that?”

“Holographic teachers wouldn't be much good as chaperones.”

Crap. I forgot about those blasted holograms. “Well, they do watch over their students.”

“No, they don't. In-class cameras monitor classroom goings-on.”

“Well, yeah, of course,” I say, “but you know, as figure-heads. They represent, uh, authority figures.” *Stop babbling, Floe.*

He looks at me. “You're an interesting girl, Floe.”

I smile weakly 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 Cullens holding up?”

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

I Was a Teenage Popsicle

"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."

If I listed the people who were in power now, you wouldn't even believe it. Let's just say that if you have political ambitions, the best thing for you to do would be to star in a dumb sitcom or a (by definition, dumb) reality show.

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 out, 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 accessories like white go-go boots. I get admiring looks from both girls and guys—including Kale!—as I head to the middle of the dance floor.

I've decided he's a hugely decent guy, BTW. Not my type, but kudos to him for trying something (somebody) new. And even though our date didn't go well, it's clear he still hasn't trashed me to his buds.

I start to move. I'm not a great dancer, but I'm not completely uncoordinated, thanks to my former life as a (non-hover) blader, and like I said, I did have the advantage of having Emma Moder as my best friend in said life . . .

I close my eyes to the wordless electronic technopop the deejay's playing, trying to really feel it, really groove.

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

I Was a Teenage Popsicle

Staring.

Nobody's joined in, like in that *Thirteen Going on Thirty* "Thriller" scene.

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," Halley 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."

Halley stares. "You fell for a *setup*?"

"Even cynics are occasionally optimistic about human nature," I retort. "And speaking of human nature, why the heck didn't you try to get me off the floor once you saw what was happening?"

"It was kind of like watching an accident in progress. I couldn't take my eyes off you. I was in some sort of trance."

"Ha-ha, very funny. Nice friend you are."

"Hey, I'm not your keeper."

I'm about to say something *really* mean when Ashleigh sashays by and says, "Way to get your freak on, newbie."

Halley glares at her. "Leave her alone, Ash." Okay, maybe I overreacted with that whole human nature

speech. Even if she still spends the majority of her time with Ashleigh, at least she defends me when her leader insults me.

Ashleigh's eyebrows go up. "You the weirdo's best friend now?"

"I said, lay off."

"What's going on here?" Kaleb says, appearing at Halley's side suddenly.

"Nothing," Halley says. "Ashleigh was just telling us how much she admired Floe's dancing. Right, Ash?"

"Yeah, right," she says, laughing.

"It was, um, interesting," Kaleb says. "Do they really dance like that in Venice Beach?"

Halley flashes him the warmest smile I've ever seen (on her, anyway).

Is it my imagination, or does he smile back slightly—and *wink*?

Ashleigh seems to notice, too.

"C'mon, Kal," she says, grabbing his elbow, glaring at Halley and me, and dragging him off, "let's show 'em how it's done."

"You, in there," Halley says, gesturing with her head toward the gym.

"Are you kidding? I can't go in there again!"

"Hon, you'd better study how us suburbanites dance before prom, or I guarantee, someone will shoot you."

Sighing, I walk with Halley back to the gym and watch from the entrance way.

I Was a Teenage Popsicle

Everyone's dancing in this weird way that seems to involve a lot of limb shaking.

"It's called popping," Halley explains. "Funny you don't know about it. I thought it started in Venice Beach, like, a dozen years ago."

I vaguely recall hearing about a new dance craze just before I croaked. No, wait. That was krumping. Popping came way before that (which shows you how culturally out of date suburban kids are).

Jeez, what made me think that just because I had a friend who danced, I was a dance expert?

"Oh, yeah, I know all about popping."

"You are *such* a bad liar," she says.

I ignore that. "Hey," I venture, "thanks for sticking up for me back there—even though it was too little, too late." I'm not about to let her off completely scot-free.

"S'nothing," she says.

"No, it was something. You've been sticking up for me a lot. Soon Ashleigh's going to hate you, too. What happened to not ticking her off?"

Halley shrugs. "Let's just say I'm a little tired of being Ashleigh Jones's sidekick. Maybe a little of your rebellious spirit has rubbed off on me."

This makes my heart swell a little, but I don't want to get all mushy on her, so I just say, "Well, I think a certain popular Cactus Hill junior guy has noticed—and likes it. The question is, what are you going to do about it?"

Halley looks at Ashleigh and Kalel, who appear to be the

star poppers. Everybody's hooting and clapping around them.

Kalel's grinning widely and putting his all into it.

I repeat, "So, what are you going to do about it?"

She looks at me. "Kalel's not interested in me. If he were, he would have said something by now. And even if he is interested, you know I can't do anything about him. Ash wants him back."

"Okay, first of all, he's probably just been holding back because he thinks *you're* not interested. And he is so *not* interested in Ashleigh."

"Still, ex-boyfriends are off limits. 'It's the first rule of feminism.' Didn't you see *Mean Girls?*?"

"That's such an old movie. How do you know about it?"

"Whaddya mean, how do I know about it? It's a classic."

"Oh, right. A classic," I say quickly.

She shakes her head. "You are *sooo* strange."

I sigh. "You should only know."

Morning. School.

People are showing each other their all-in-one screens and giggling.

Nobody's showing me anything, though.

And nobody's meeting my eyes.

Not that they would show me anything, talk to me, or look at me normally.

But I know instinctively what's being shown has something to do with me.

When I spot Halley in the hall, even she lowers her eyes.

I grab her all-in-one out of her hand.

"Hey, Floe, give it back!"

I look at her.

She sighs. "Okay. You should see it, I guess."

I take a look.

Someone's done up a newspaper-style thing titled *Cactus Hill Valentine's Day News*. There's a column listing all the school couples, and a short piece describing the dance and giving kudos to the organizers, but the screaming headline is "New Girl Rocks Out!" The article is accompanied by a photograph of me dancing—eyes closed—while people around me stare, laugh, and point.

There's a three-line bit of print underneath the picture. Horrified, I read, *Floe Ryan, a tenth-grader who joined us at Cactus Hill just last month, showed us how it's done where she comes from. (Where do you think that is? Saturn? Venus? Write in and let us know!)*

I just stand there, stunned.

"So where you from, anyway?" some goofball I recognize from my math class calls out.

"My guess is Mars," somebody else calls out.

"No, the moon!" somebody else says. "They're starting to colonize it!"

"Hey, Floe, didja go out with the man in the moon?"

Whoever said that makes a kissy-kissy sound, and soon the whole hallway's making kissy-kissy noises.

"Oh, God, I'm so sorry, Floe," Halley says over the din.

Eyes flashing, I whip around to face her. "Yeah, well you should be."

She draws back, hurt. I feel bad for a second, but only for a second. "What did I do?"

"*What did I do?*" I mimic in a high-pitched tone. "You

I Was a Teenage Popsicle

know, Halley, real friends don't just split their time between the mean girls and the decent people. They spend *all* their time with the decent people."

With that, I throw her all-in-one to the floor, smashing it to bits.

The kissy-kissy noises cease.

I'm called down to the principal's office.

It's not a holographic principal. It's a real, flesh-and-blood principal. And, just as you'd expect in Cactus Hill, as opposed to Venice Beach, he's a law-and-order-type guy. Not touchy-feely in the least. His name, appropriately, is Mr. Stone.

"Miss Ryan," Stone says sternly, "we simply do not have the staff or the desire to deal with insurgent elements here at Cactus Hill Secondary School."

Insurgent elements?

"I realize you may be experiencing a certain level of frustration as a result of starting a new school midterm—"

"Yeah, it was really hard—"

"—but that's no excuse to engage in criminal behavior."

Criminal?

"We have a three-strikes-you're-out policy at this school, Miss Ryan," he continues. "Consider this your first strike."

"With all due respect, sir, I don't think I committed a crime. I did break a friend's all-in-one, and I will apologize and offer to fix or replace it, but—"

"That's enough, Miss Ryan," Stone says. "A crime against one student here is considered to be a crime against the collective school body."

"If that's the case, sir, I can most certainly make a case of harassment against several of the stu—"

He leans forward, his eyes glittering. I wonder if there's something in the drinking water these days that's turning middle-aged men like Stone and Dr. Tanz into psychos.

"Harassment?" he says menacingly. "Is that a Venice Beach word?"

"No, sir," I say, drawing myself up in my chair. No way I'm gonna let this guy intimidate me. "It's a global word."

"Let me tell you a little something about *harassment*, Miss Ryan. If you continue to be a disruption at this school—"

"Sir, I haven't been a disrupt—"

"—I will have no choice but to—"

Expel me? I think hopefully. Maybe then I'd be able to talk Sunny into enrolling me at VBA. In fact, maybe I should cause regular "disruptions" to ensure that will happen . . .

"—punish you even more harshly than I'm going to punish you today. Today, your punishment—"

Punishment?

"—will be to clean the classroom ceilings."

Say, what?

"Um, how am I supposed to do that, sir?"

He glares at me. "Why, by hovercleaning, of course."

— — —

I Was a Teenage Popsicle

Stone's even less happy with me when I tell him I can't hoverblade. Apparently, the janitorial staff, all being older folk, can't hoverblade either, and can't get at the glass ceilings to clean them.

Instead of hovercleaning the ceilings, I'm made to clean the floors, a task made almost fun with this new robotic Swiffer-type thing. I've been doing the floors at home with one (just call me Floe-erella), so I already know how to operate it. It looks like a skinnier version of the robot from *The Jetsons*. You set it loose in a room, and it figures out the parameters and doesn't stop till it's done. It also responds to words and actions when you say certain things. ("Go," "Stop," et cetera.) *Totally* fun.

Sunny is *not* happy when she comes to pick me up. On the way out, she says, "Nice, Floe. Detention? Punishment?"

"That guy's a nut! It was between me and Hal—"

"Floe, I'm really not interested. You're forgetting I know you."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"It means I know how crazy you can get."

"Crazy?!"

"You may have been able to get away with that rebellion stuff in Venice Beach, but it won't fly here, kiddo."

"Maybe if more people rebelled, the world would be a better place."

Sunny stops in her place. "You know what, Floe? I happen to think the world—my world, this world, the world of

Bev Katz Rosenbaum

Cactus Hill—is pretty fine just the way it is. There’s no place for your hippie crap here.”

How many times are we going to have this conversation?
Until Mom and Dad come back.

Which means I have to totally up my efforts to save the Cryonics Center.

By the time I get home, the focus of my anger has switched from Halley to Dixon. If he and Bea had helped me with more reintegration support, I wouldn't be having so many problems at Cactus Hill High. But he and Bea are completely unavailable, thanks to the lawsuit, and I don't have a soul I can talk to. Halley's out of the question now, I've vowed to leave Taz alone, Runt's gone (she malfunctioned and had to be returned—not that I could actually *confide* in Runt), and Sunny is, well, Sunny.

It hits me suddenly. There *is* one person I could talk to about all of this. I've discounted her as a confidante because of the difference in our ages (or *is* there one?—I'm still *really* confused about this age thing), but I know from experience she's a person of compassion and understanding. And

as a bonus, she's now a successful businesswoman who will surely be able to give me some advice about how to keep the center and my parents afloat. (Forgive the terrible pun).

It's late, but I figure since she's twenty-six, she's probably still awake.

She's surprised to hear from me when I call, but by the time I hang up, I've made arrangements for Emma Moder to pick me up and drive me to her Venice Beach apartment on the weekend.

— — —

"Hey, nice place," I say when she invites me in. And it is. Space age, but still warm, somehow. Lots of pinks and reds. Very Karim Rashid, who was definitely ahead of his time. Exactly how I would decorate an apartment, if I were old enough to have one.

Well, technically I am, but—you know the drill.

"Have a seat. Can I get you a drink or something?"

"Um, got a soda?"

She gives me a strange look and says, "Uh, sure." She smiles. "I think I even have your favorite."

A minute later, she hands me my favorite flavor (kiwi-kumquat) of Double B Soda. (Favorite beverage of bladers and boarders worldwide!) I almost start to cry because Emma remembers.

"Thanks," I choke out.

She lowers herself into a chair across from the couch I'm seated on. "I'm glad you're here, Floe. I want to say again

I Was a Teenage Popsicle

that I'm so sorry I never got in touch with you. It was really unforgive—"

"Emma," I say, lifting a hand. "You were sixteen. And I was moved to Marshland."

She shakes her head. "Sixteen is old enough to have known better."

"As I recall, the entire country was terrified by the lymphaticosis outbreak. A bunch of sixteen-year-olds certainly couldn't be expected to be the cool heads that prevailed."

She smiles. "You're awfully understanding."

"Well, let's just say that in the long run, it turned out to be a good thing that nobody kept in touch with me."

She wrinkles her brow. "How do you get that?"

"Well . . ." Maybe it's better to just come out with it. In a rush, I say, "See, I really died, and my parents arranged to have me cryonically preserved. You know that doctors just figured out how to cure my disease—at least, the strain I had—but what you don't know is that Dr. Abe Dixon recently figured out how to reverse the cryopreservation process." I stop and wait, nervously.

She stares. "But he's being sued—"

"He wants to keep it quiet until there are more of us, and until he observes us for a while." Not that he's been doing all that much—any—observing.

She's still staring. "So—you were dead."

"Not by today's standards," I say carefully, watching her. "Back then, you were pronounced dead a few minutes after your heart stopped. These days it's much longer."

Bev Katz Rosenbaum

“Oh, wow . . .” she says, leaning back in her chair.

I’m actually a little more relaxed now. A weight’s been lifted. I wait patiently for the questions.

“So . . . you’re still sixteen?” she says a moment later.

“Well, yeah, sort of. I was born twenty-six years ago, but physically and emotionally, I’m exactly where I was ten years ago.”

“Wow,” Emma says again. She smiles weakly. “Sure beats Botox.”

I smile and stay silent.

“And your parents are—?”

“Frozen, too. But now the Cryonics Center might be closed down, and they might never be thawed.”

“Oh, Floe, that’s awful!”

I nod.

“So you’ve been living with . . .”

“Sunny,” I say.

I can see the wheels turning in Emma’s mind. “Who is now—”

“Twenty-three.”

She looks at me. “While you’re . . .”

“Twenty-six, but sixteen, because I was preserved.”

“Which is why you’re still in high school . . .”

“Right.”

She looks at me. “So Sunny’s your guardian?”

“Uh-huh.”

She looks at me. “That must be . . . weird.”

I laugh. “Emma, everything about my life is weird.”

I Was a Teenage Popsicle

Now she looks anguished. "But you didn't say anything when I saw you in the café—"

"I was the first one thawed. I didn't want to lie to you. But like I said, I'm supposed to be keeping it under my hat."

"So . . . why are you telling me now?"

I give her a small smile. "Would you believe I have nobody else to talk to? My parents are frozen, too, the Dixons are all busy with this lawsuit stuff, and Sunny is on this power trip, acting like she's my mother. And I haven't really made any friends at my new high school."

"Oh, honey," Emma says, coming over to give me a big hug. "What you've been through . . . I'm so sorry—"

"Thanks, but I didn't come here for sympathy. There are a couple of concrete things I need your help with."

"Name them," she says, sitting on the couch beside me.

I explain about how I need to help Dixon and the center without going public so my parents will be thawed, and then I give her the details about how Sunny blew my parents' money and how I need to earn back their nest egg.

"I just can't believe all this," she murmurs when I'm done.

"That makes two of us."

She looks at me. "Floe Ryan, you must be the bravest girl in the world."

"Thanks, but I don't feel very brave—I feel like a coward, not going public."

"Dixon doesn't want you to go public. And it wouldn't

be very brave doing something rash. He's right. You could be putting your life in danger."

"Life's pretty dangerous *now*," I say wryly. "Some piece of technology I don't understand is gonna do me in for sure."

She laughs. "Are things so different? I can't remember what came to be when."

"Oh, things are different, all right." I give her a couple of examples, like Skedpets and holographic teachers.

"People my age aren't really into the Skedpets. And I graduated university before holographic teachers were widely used." She shakes her head. "I can imagine how hard all this must be for you. You definitely need your parents back."

"Right. So, can you help me think of a way to make enough money for the Dixons to keep the Cryonics Center open *and* make back my parents' nest egg?"

Emma taps her chin with a finger—an old habit. "Well, coming up with business ideas is a little outside my area of expertise—"

"Emma," I blurt, "what the heck *is* PR, anyway?"

She smiles. "It has more to do with publicity, bringing attention to a business once it's created."

"Oh." I'm a little deflated.

"But I'm pretty creative, and I love brainstorming. Why don't we go out for lunch and see what we can come up with?"

I smile. "Lunch sounds great."

I Was a Teenage Popsicle

“I know just the place—the Burrito Hut.”

“The Burrito Hut?” I squeal. “Is it still there?” I *loooove* the bean burritos from the Burrito Hut!

“Oh, yeah, baby. Redesigned—it’s totally lost its character—but the burritos are still great. And you know we always had our best ideas over burritos. C’mon, let’s rock and roll.”

“Omigod, they’re still the best burritos, like, ever,” I say reverently.

“Mmm,” Emma says, her eyes closed. “Beats even the fanciest Beverly Hills joint.” She opens her eyes after swallowing, and says, “So, about your mission—”

“Emma, it’s okay. It’s not really your area. Don’t worry about it.”

“Girl, are you saying I couldn’t have become a businesswoman if I wanted to?”

I grin. “I wouldn’t dare. You could have become anything you wanted to.”

“That’s better. Now we’re here to brainstorm—let’s brainstorm.”

“Uh, okay.”

I Was a Teenage Popsicle

We're quiet for a minute.

"This is working real well." I take a bite of my burrito.

"My Lord, ten years in a deep freeze, and the girl's still as full of sarcasm as ever. I'm *thinking*. People do that silently, you know."

"Riiiiight." I take another bite of my burrito.

"Here's the problem," she says thoughtfully, between bites. "If you just wanted to publicize the cryonics cause, that would be one thing. We'd come up with a huge media campaign and people would donate to the center. The thing is, it takes a lot of money to launch that kind of campaign—you have to pay for newspaper, radio, TV spots, et cetera—and even if the campaign worked and people donated like crazy, none of the money could be diverted to you or your parents."

"So that's out," I say glumly.

"Wait a minute," she says slowly, "I'm working on a project right now for a ballet company. They're raising money by selling toe shoes custom painted by famous artists. Every shoe has a distinctive design and a quote about the importance of dance. The shoes are on display at a gallery, and the profits are being split between the gallery, the artists, and the ballet company."

"So," I say after a minute, "you think we should do the same thing—sell some sort of product associated with the Cryonics Center, with a message on it about saving the center? That's not a bad idea. A portion of the profits could go to the center—"

“And a portion could go to you, and the outlet at which you sell the product.”

“And I thought you were just a PR person.”

Emma grins and takes a bite out of her burrito.

“But what would the product be?”

“Some kind of cool ice-cube mold?” she suggests.

“That’s a possibility,” I say. “It doesn’t wow me, though. If our product is ‘cool’ enough, ha-ha, it could totally turn the tide of public opinion, maybe make the Cullens decide to drop the lawsuit. How ’bout a snow globe-type thing with a cryonics chamber in it?”

“Mmmm,” Emma says.

I grin, knowing my idea didn’t wow her. We’re almost back to relating the way we used to. It feels nice.

It feels better than nice. It feels great.

“But you’ve got the idea,” Emma says. “Let’s take a few days to think. We can meet again next week.”

We set a date, then order Mexican ice cream for dessert.

“So,” I ask while shoving it down—pure heaven! “Do you still see anybody from the old days?” Then it hits me.

“Oh my God! I didn’t tell you about Taz!”

She stops midspoonful and looks at me. “Taz. The guy you were with at the café that night.”

“Don’t you remember?” I say excitedly. “He was a year older than us and I had a huge crush on him?”

She puts the spoon in her mouth, and nods. “Yeah—I do remember now! So does he live in Cactus Hill, too? Is that how you reconnected?”

I Was a Teenage Popsicle

I shake my head and grin. “I shouldn’t really be telling you this—oh my God, you have to totally promise you won’t tell anybody!”

“Cross my heart and hope to die. C’mon, I’m dying of curiosity, girl. Spill!”

I savor the moment, then say, “He was the second person thawed.”

Her eyes widen. “Oh my God—he got lymphaticosis in the outbreak, too . . .”

“That’s right. We were both taken to the Marshland clinic. One of the doctors there was friendly with Dixon—ended up marrying him. She persuaded our parents to freeze us.”

“Holy crap,” Emma whispers.

I nod. “I know. What are the chances, right?” I grin. “We were stuck together for three whole weeks.”

“Get out!”

“Went through rehab together, got really close.”

“So you’re like, *together* now?”

My grin fades. “Not really, no.”

She looks confused. “What happened?”

I sigh. “Real life, I guess. I should have known. We weren’t in the same league.”

She crosses her arms. “Ain’t no girlfriend of mine gonna talk that way. And anyway, I’m sure he doesn’t feel that way. From what I can recall, he seemed like a nice guy, not into status or anything. We didn’t have that stuff going on at VBA.”

I smile. "Thanks. You're sweet. It's probably more that our thing at the center wasn't real, you know? It was like a camp or vacation fling."

"Lots of relationships that start at camps or on vacations end up lasting."

"Yeah, well, this one's not going to."

"Maybe he just needs some time to get used to his new life."

"His life isn't all that different. He's back here in Venice Beach."

"You'd be surprised. The Beach isn't what it used to be."

I look at her. "Really?" Just as I've been suspecting.

"There's all kinds of controversial stuff going on now—big-box stores, strip malls. Some of the old diehards are fighting the changes, but I'm not sure we can hold out much longer."

"That's so sad!" I say. Hmm, could it be that Taz *is* having trouble adjusting to what it sounds like is a very different Venice Beach?

"You said it," Emma says.

"But it's not that way yet," I say.

"A few things here and there. But the people are really different. People with a lot of money have overtaken the place. That was just starting to happen ten years ago."

"Huh," I say. "But obviously they moved in cuz they like the feel of the place."

"Yeah," she says. "But historically, that's what happens. As soon as people with money move into a 'cool' area, the big stores move in and the original shops get pushed out."

I Was a Teenage Popsicle

“Well, I’d try to help,” I say, “but I sort of have my hands full with other causes right now.”

“You sure do. God, listen to us, depressing the heck out of each other. You asked about people I still see. Want some gossip?”

“Oh, yeah, baby. Lay it on me.”

Her eyes twinkle. “Twyla Goldstein and Matt Brown are married.”

Now it’s my turn to say, “Get out!”

“Uh-huh. Just came back from their honeymoon.”

“How great!” I say, feeling a bit weird. It was strange enough seeing Emma all dressed up like the grownup she is—old classmates of mine are actually *married!*

“Uh-oh. Am I totally freaking you out?” Emma asks.

“No!” Yes. I smile. “It’s fine.” Weird, but fine. And much less weird than finding out I was frozen.

She tells me about some other people she sees from the old days, and then I say, “So do you have anyone . . . special?”

“Nah. I’m focusing on my career right now. I don’t see marriage happening for a good long time.”

“Not even a boy toy?”

“Not even.”

“Shame,” I say. I look around. “Do you get . . . lonely?”

“Not really. I keep busy, and I have my family.”

“Omigod, I didn’t even ask about your family! How are they?”

“Great.” She smiles. “They’d love to see you.”

"I'd love to see them, too," I say wistfully.

"Maybe when all this settles down, I'll have you all over for dinner."

"Maybe we should wait until everything's public. I'm kinda tired of having to lie to people."

Emma nods understandingly, then puts a hand on mine. "Everything will work out, Floe."

I muster a smile. "I hope you're right." I pause. "And speaking of things working out, any chance I could get a couple of popping lessons before the prom?"



I begin to think Emma's right about things working out when, on Monday morning, Halley corners me at my locker.

"We have to talk," she says. "Seeing as you didn't answer my calls all weekend."

I turn to face her. Running a hand through my hair, I say, "Look, Halley, I'm really sorry about the things I said. And about your all-in-one. I'll pay to get it fixed—or for a new one."

How I'm going to get the money for that, I'm not quite sure, but I'll figure it out later—after I figure out how to earn the enormous sum of money it will take to keep the Cryonics Center open and replace my parents' nest egg.

"You've been nice to me," I continue. "This is my problem, not yours."

"No, it isn't just your problem," she says—kind of

I Was a Teenage Popsicle

loudly, and looking pointedly over at a couple of Ashleigh Jones wanna-bes, who scurry away, giggling. "You were right. It's my problem, too. It's everybody's problem. You've been treated like crap, by a lot of people, for no reason."

"Halley," I say, "it's fine. You can lower your voice. It's not that important."

"Yes, it is important." She's practically shouting now. "Is everybody listening? Floe Ryan deserves an apology."

I grab her arm and whisper, "Fine, everybody gets it. Now be quiet."

"But I thought—"

"You thought wrong. *I* thought wrong. You wanna have an article written about you, too?"

She grins. "You didn't think I'd do it, did you?"

I let go. "Do what?"

"Step up to the plate when it counted."

I think for a minute. "No, actually, I didn't."

Her grin gets wider. "Ash isn't here today."

I laugh. "I should have known."

Not that it makes a difference. The wanna-bes heard what Halley said, and will surely report back to their leader.

"C'mon," I say, "we'd better get to math. Can't wait to find out what I'm not gonna understand today."

It's the third day of Ashleigh's absence—some kind of cold or flu, Halley says. In the meantime, she's been hanging with me—says she can't stand the wannabes anymore—and it's nice. I'm gonna hate it when the queen is back. Not that Halley will necessarily go back to hanging with her. But I won't say anything if she does. I was wrong to give Halley an ultimatum, and I've told her so.

Nobody aside from Halley has actually apologized to me, but after a couple of days, the laughing and pointing stops, and everybody's back to ignoring me. They're on to Michelle Margolis's cousin, who had the gall to come to school with a giant zit smack-dab in the middle of her nose. (Funny how scientists can bring people back to life, but they still can't figure out how to get rid of zits.)

I Was a Teenage Popsicle

Halley's been on me about getting some crystal jewelry to go with my unitards, so we walk to the mall after school.

The first person we bump into once we're there is Kalel. And I do mean "bump into." Halley literally bumps into him.

"Oh, sorry—oh, Kalel . . . hi!"

Can you say "flustered"?

She's red as a beet now (those pale-skinned redheads) and Kalel grins. "Hi." He nods at me. "Hey, Floe. How's it goin'?"

"It's goin'." I don't want to say much. I'm enjoying watching Halley squirm too much. And I want her to be forced to converse with Kalel.

"So . . . you shopping?" she says lamely.

This is *really* fun.

He looks at her. "Yeah."

Could it be? Is he finally noticing how uncomfortable she is? How *in love* with him she is? It's kind of written all over her face. He's a nice guy, but not the brightest star in the sky, if you know what I mean.

"So what are you shopping for?" Halley's voice is strangely high-pitched.

If Kalel doesn't get it now, he's a lost cause.

"Do you have laryngitis or something?" he asks.

Oh, man.

"No," she croaks. "It's dry in here."

"Uh-huh," he says.

"You alone?" I ask.

“Yeah. I’m not here long. Busted up my smashball glove. Have to get a new one.”

“Took my smash-’em-up advice a bit too much to heart, huh?”

He laughs. “Yeah.”

Halley looks devastated. Clearly, she thinks I’ve upstaged her.

A fly could have upstaged her.

“Wanna join us?” I ask Kael.

Now she looks like she’s seen Godzilla. “No—Floe—we can’t! We have to—”

“What?” I say, glaring at her.

“I have to, um, buy a bra.”

Kael grins. “I don’t mind tagging along for that.”

I smile sweetly at her. “I’m sure Kael would be more than happy to help you pick one out.”

Now she looks like a lobster. “Um, thanks, but no thanks.”

He laughs. “Well, so long, then.”

He walks off with Halley staring after him. “Omigod.” She closes her eyes. “I can’t believe I said that. I *totally* blew it.”

“I thought you didn’t want to go out with him,” I say nonchalantly.

“I don’t,” she returns hastily.

“Yeah, right.”

“Okay, so I do, but I told you, I can’t.”

“Can’t, or won’t?”

I Was a Teenage Popsicle

“Neither—don’t. Want to talk about it,” she adds.

We’re in front of the Crystal Hut, a hip-to-the-max mall-based megachain that sells crystal accessories. “Saved by the store,” she mutters.

“You wish. This isn’t the end of it.”

She drags me inside. “Hi, Dad,” she says to a guy who’s a dead ringer for Kiefer Sutherland (from 24—miss that show like crazy)! In other words, he’s not bad looking for a dad. I can tell with one look that he’s incredibly sharp—but not a shark. His smile is too nice.

“Oh, hey, Halley,” he says, smiling. “Just checking up on my favorite location.” He gives me a friendly look. “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. Halley never told me her father owned the Crystal Hut.

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

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

“Yup,” Halley 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, whaddya 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?”

Bev Katz Rosenbaum

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

"Not if you glued them onto a strip of leather or rubber, or hung them with copper wires—"

The idea hits me so fast it almost hurts.

It's perfect.

And Halley can help me.

But first I have to tell her.

Everything.

"Halley, is there an office or something in here where we could talk, privately?" I say urgently.

She looks at me kinda the way she looked at me that first day, when her Skedpet freaked me out.

"Uh, yeah, at the back. Why?"

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

"Um, okay," she says. "Geez, 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, running a hand through my hair.

"You'd better be! Jeez, 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. "Halley, you've gotta believe

I Was a Teenage Popsicle

me.” The words come tumbling out. I tell her everything—about the Dixons, Taz, my parents, Sunny. What I have to do.

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

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

She shakes her head. “It’s hard to believe, but”—she looks at me—“yeah, I believe you.” She pauses. “So you’re really what, 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,” Halley says again, her eyes even wider.

“I know it’s mind-blowing,” I say tiredly, suddenly realizing 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 moneymaking idea: imprinting leather or rubber bracelets (adorned with crys-

tals, natch) with messages about saving the Cryonics Center—a nod to those colored rubber “cause” bracelets à la the ones Lance Armstrong created for his Livestrong Foundation way back when.

When I’m done, she nods slowly and says, “You know, that just might work.”

“I can come up with the designs easily enough—my mom was really into jewelry making for a while, and I used to work with her—but I’ll need some help coming up with the messages.”

I know the perfect person—Taz, who writes the most incredible song lyrics. But I can’t ask him.

Halley waves a hand. “We’ll think of something. Let’s tell Dad—”

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

She rolls her eyes. “Whaddya think I am—stupid? Of course not. I’m just gonna tell him it’ll be a cool thing to sell. People our age will buy them, for sure. They eat up all that zombie stuff.” She looks at me. “Sorry, I didn’t mean—”

“I know,” I say, grinning. “I’m not a zombie, anyway.” I wait a beat. “More like a Popsicle.”

Giggling, we head over to Halley’s dad to tell him about the idea that might save the Venice Beach Cryonics Center (not to mention my sister’s butt), and make him some money in the bargain.

“Omigod, Floe, you’re going to be like—”

“Like who?” I ask, grinning, and digging into my veggie chow mein at the food court.

“I actually can’t think of a famous jewelry designer who isn’t also a clothing designer,” Halley says, midburger-chew.

I laugh. “I highly doubt some bracelets are going to make me famous. At this point, I just want to make some money to give to Dixon and my parents. And I’m under no illusion that what I make from this—if it goes—will be enough for either of them.”

“Are you kidding? My dad wouldn’t agree to look at your prototypes if he didn’t love the idea.”

I’m doubtful. “Are you sure? He knows I’m your friend. Maybe he was just being nice.”

“Don’t let that crinkly-eyed smile fool you. Many of my friends have gotten lectures about how tough the business and fashion worlds are, and to come back once they have full-fledged business and design degrees.”

“Really?” Okay, now I do allow myself to get a little excited. “What will happen if he likes the prototypes?”

“He’ll subcontract out the manufacturing so he can get the bracelets into every single Crystal Hut in the country.”

I blink. “Would he do that?”

She grins. “I’d make sure he would.” Her voice assumes a no-nonsense tone. “So let’s think about those prototypes. I can snag a few crystals from Dad.”

“We can get the rest of what we need at a craft store,” I say.

“Let’s go after dinner,” Halley suggests.

“You bet. God, Halley, thanks for all your help with this.”

She waves a hand, and finishes her burger. “Please. This will be so much fun, it might even stop me from thinking about—” She stops abruptly.

“About what?” I ask innocently. “Or should I say, about whom?”

“Nothing and nobody,” she returns, glaring. After wiping the table quickly with a napkin, she whips a pad of paper out of her purse and says crisply, “Now, what do you think about this?” She does a quick sketch of a bracelet.

“Nice,” I comment. “You’re a talented artist. So talented, I almost forgot where our conversation was leading.”

I Was a Teenage Popsicle

She sighs and shoves the paper in my direction. "Don't. Want. To. Talk. About. It. Sketch," she commands.

I grin, then look down at the pad. "Yours is great—almost exactly what I was thinking, but I think the bands should be a bit narrower. The slogans should be in a really hip font, and the crystals should be studded in between the words. Like this," I add as I draw.

Halley nods slowly. "I like it."

"So can you think of any good slogans?" I ask.

"How about 'Save the VBCC.' "

"That's pretty . . . straightforward," I say.

She folds her arms. "Let's hear what you can do."

I rack my brain. And come up with—nothing. "Who would have guessed this would be the hard part?"

"The slogans are key," Halley says glumly.

"You're telling me."

Again, I think of Taz, songwriter par excellence. But there ain't no way I'm about to ask *him* for help.

"Hey, stranger."

Okay, how weird is it that the minute I think about him, he's right behind me?

Gulping, I turn around. "Taz!" He's alone. And looking gorgeous in faded cigarette jeans—the kind the punk rockers used to wear—and a Green Day T-shirt. My heart starts to beat loudly. You'd think the old organ wouldn't be quite so responsive after being vitrified for so long.

"In the flesh," he says.

I can't think of anything to say.

"I'm Taz," he finally says to Halley, when I'm just on the verge of asking what he's doing in Cactus Hill. (Dare I even hope he was looking for me?)

"Oh, right! Taz, Halley, Halley, Taz."

"Hey," Halley says.

"What are you guys doing?" he says, looking curiously at our sketches.

"Er, noth—"

"Floe just came up with a fund-raising project for the Cryonics Center."

He looks at me. "Really."

I can't read his tone. But I'm not about to beg for his help.

But then he sits down beside me.

Our legs touch.

I consider telling him to move over, but decide against it.

This is not good. Not good at all.

"These sketches are really great," he murmurs. "Especially this one." He points to mine.

"That's Floe's," Halley says.

"It's *really* great." He looks straight into my eyes.

"Thanks. It's okay, but . . . it's not like I'm Sari or anything." Sue me, I can't help myself sometimes.

He visibly winces. "No, you're not like Sari."

Now, what the heck does that mean?

"You're better," he says quietly.

I stare. Does he mean I'm a better artist? A better person? A better girlfriend? A better potential girlfriend? What?

I Was a Teenage Popsicle

What's his relationship with her? What's his relationship with *me*? He did kiss me. But that was many moons ago now. Has he kissed Sari? Should I care? Should I forget about him? Fight for him? Can you fight for a person and still not lean on him?

HELP!

"We need slogans," Halley says bluntly.

Oh, lord. "Halley, I'm sure Taz isn't interested—"

"Slogans." His tone is thoughtful. God, I love his "work" voice. "You mean, like, 'Frozen zombies rule' or something?"

"That's good," Halley says.

"It is," I admit.

He flashes me a sexy smile. "Thanks."

Okay, I'm practically holding my breath, for fear that my shifting position in the slightest will cause him to move his leg away from mine. And while I think that's probably an excellent idea, I don't want it to happen.

God, it feels good to hang with Taz again.

Really good.

But I can't get used it.

Can I?

"So, slogans," he says, all business now. "Here are a few more ideas . . ."

I'm about to leave the house to meet Taz for a hoverblading lesson (no, I have no idea whether it's a date), but Ann and Mike Parsons stop me after I mutter a quick "Hi" and "Good-bye." They're waiting for Sunny and Andrew, who are beautifying themselves upstairs. (They're all off to the club, natch.)

"Flo! Where are you running to? Are you playing tennis, too?" Ann exclaims. I look at her, thinking that exclaiming must be difficult for her, given how much plastic surgery she appears to have had.

"Um, no. I'm going hoverblading."

"Hoverblading," Mike, a perpetually tanned investment banker says. He's twenty-eight going on forty-six. Not old looking (in fact, he's kinda cute, in that overly privileged way), just old in mindset, you know? The kind of guy who

I Was a Teenage Popsicle

has five-year plans and judges his success by how many toys he has. "I'm pretty good, if you need any pointers."

I force a smile. "Thanks. Okay, I'm outta here."

My point doesn't seem to register.

"Oh, Floe, it's so wonderful that you're back in Sunny's life. She really missed you," Ann says, sighing.

Say what?

"You're practically the only thing she talks about," Mike says in a tone that suggests he doesn't understand why on earth people would spend precious time talking about their loved ones.

Huh? Are they talking about my sister? The one whose style I'm cramping in a very big way? Is it possible she has a clone? (I'm sure it's being done. Maybe the cloning guy is keeping it under wraps, like Abe.)

Ann dabs at her eyes with a tissue. "It makes me cry, just talking about it."

Okay, this is definitely weird.

Could Sunny be talking about me to impress them somehow?

Nah. That wouldn't make any sense. The trials of dealing with a teenaged ward (not that I think I'm a *trial*, exactly) isn't what would impress Sunny's bunch. They're only impressed by talk of Caribbean villas and designer originals and such.

"She's so cute. So insecure. So worried about being a bad guardian," Ann continues.

Sunny? Insecure? Worried about being a bad guardian? Who knew?

Mike smiles tightly. Yup, I was right. He gets impatient talking about this stuff. "We try our best to take her mind off things."

Ann leans in. "I recommended she talk to my therapist. I think he gave her something, she was having such a hard time."

Wha—?

"Andrew said she didn't take it, though," Mike says. Clearly, he wishes she had.

Just then, there's a knock on the door.

I practically run to answer it—anything to get away from Ann and Mike.

"Hey, Marissa," I say. Marissa lives down the block. She's a gorgeous, ditzzy blonde who married rich and has a kid Jake's age. Her hubby's rarely home. Sunny and Andrew think he's got something going "on the side." If he does, he's an idiot. I really like Marissa. She's sweet. Ignorant, but sweet.

"Hey, Floe," she answers happily, juggling her kid, Beau (I kid you not), in her arms. "We're here to stay with Jake for the morning."

See? Heart of gold.

"Come on in. Do you know Ann and Mike Parsons?"

"Oh, sure," she says, beaming. "From the club. Hi, guys."

"Hi there." Mike smiles at Marissa. A bit too interestedly. Uh-oh. I can already see Ann thinking about more plastic surgery.

Marissa shifts Beau in her arms. "Ooo, this guy's squirming today."

I Was a Teenage Popsicle

"He's adorable," Ann says.

Marissa flashes her a big smile. "Thanks. We'll just head on into the den."

"I'll go upstairs and get Jake," I say, thankful for another opportunity to escape Ann and Mike.

A minute later, I'm in the den, where Marissa and Beau are already happily playing on the floor. "Look who's here, Jake-y, a friend!"

Jake grins delightedly, and I sit him down on the blanket Marissa's spread out.

"They're too cute together." I watch them playing with the soft blocks Marissa's brought.

"You bet," Marissa says, smiling. "It's nice for Beau to have a playmate so close by since he's an only child." Wistfully, she adds, "I was an only child all my life, so I know how it feels." She turns to me. "You must be so grateful to have Sunny. I know she's so thrilled that you're here."

This again?

"Confused, but thrilled," Marissa clarifies. "She's been so anxious about doing all the right things for you."

Her idea of the right things, I think.

"She's been second-guessing herself all over the place," Marissa says.

She has?

"I guess that's what I have to look forward to when little Beau here grows up." Cooing at Beau, she says, "Isn't that right, widdle iddle Beau-sy?"

"Hey, guys," Sunny says at the doorway. She comes over

to Jake and plants a kiss on his cheek. "How's my Jake-y wake-y?" She turns to me. "Thanks for getting him out of his crib."

"I can feed him before I go," I offer.

"No need," Marissa says. "I'll do it."

"Thanks, Mar," Sunny says. "There's a bottle in the fridge."

"Thanks for coming, Marissa," I say awkwardly. "Usually I babysit, but—"

"You have a life," Sunny finishes.

I look at her, but she's busy playing with Jake and Beau.

"Right. But next time—"

"We'll work it out, Floe."

"Um, okay," I say, at a loss for words.

I say my own good-byes and head to the neighborhood skate park, where I'm meeting Taz, in a kind of a daze.

Could it be that I've somehow entered a parallel universe?

Or is Sunny really sensitive and insecure under all her posturing?

I do know that she can't be half as confident and carefree as she so desperately wants to appear, given her upbringing, which was a fertile breeding ground for every neurosis in the book.

But what I've found out this morning is something completely new.

I've found out that Sunny might actually love me.

Like I said, I'm not sure if this is a date or just a casual outing with a friend. But it sure feels like a date. Not that I've had much experience with dates. But there are definitely butterflies swooping around in my stomach, and I never experienced *that* when I took in a flick with my monosyllabic blading buds. (Or malled-it with Kalel.)

But after all I've been through with Taz, how can I be nervous around him?

Easy, I think, looking at him hungrily. My God, he's gorgeous.

I force myself to sound calm when I speak. "I can't believe you know how to hoverblade."

Taz grins. "Practiced about two hours every day after school till I got it."

"I practiced a lot, too. I doubt you can help me," I say mournfully. "Blondie couldn't even help me."

"Blondie?" he asks. "Another new friend?"

"No," I say, sighing. "The chick from the *Hoverblading for Beginners* DVD."

Taz grins. "Well, it's time to forget all about Blondie. I'll have you flying before anyone even gets here."

It's still pretty early—the bladers haven't gotten out of bed yet—and we're all alone at the blade park we arranged to meet at, halfway between Cactus Hill and Venice Beach.

I arranged an early meeting on purpose so I wouldn't make a total fool of myself. Well, I still will, just not in front of a huge crowd of people. Only in front of Taz, which is bad enough.

Worse.

Still, if he can help me, it might be worth the supreme embarrassment.

"All strapped in?" he asks.

"Yup," I say.

He grins. "It wouldn't kill you to be a little more enthusiastic."

"Taz, I'm telling you, it's hopeless."

"How can it be hopeless?" he demands. "You've been a blader all your life."

"It's different," I insist. "I'm telling you, I've killed myself trying to figure this out."

"There's a trick to it that I bet Blondie didn't show you. It's something I figured out myself on, like, my twentieth at-

I Was a Teenage Popsicle

tempt. Here, lemme show you—” He proceeds to demonstrate a little extra push he gives the lever when he kicks it. “It’s like a double kick—gives it an extra little, well, kick,” he explains.

“That really works?” I ask dubiously.

“It does,” he says. “I know, doesn’t seem like it should. Course, you have to have the stance and all the rest of it, too. Dixon was right on the money with that stuff. But these hoverblade things are temperamental. You had little tricks for your blades way back when, right?”

I nod. “Yeah.”

“And it took you a while to figure out those tricks, right?”

“I guess,” I admit.

“So go ahead—give it a shot.”

I do. Once. Twice. Three times.

“So much for your trick,” I say glumly.

“Floe, it takes practice.”

I smile. “If I hear that one more time, I think I’m going to murder somebody.”

“You practiced your rear off when you bladed back in the Beach.”

“But I was good at it!”

“How do you think you *got* good?”

I shrug. “I was *always* good.”

He laughs. “You remember when you learned? I can’t remember that far back.”

I think a minute. “I guess I don’t,” I say, surprised.

“Fifteen times,” he orders me. “At least. Using the trick. Go.”

“Fifteen?” I ask incredulously.

“Yup,” he says.

“It’s hopeless, I’m telling you,” I mutter.

“Go!”

So I do.

I go once. Twice. Three times.

“What did I tell you?” I say grumpily.

“One more time,” he says. “Maybe sixteen’s the charm.”

“What’s so special about sixteen?” I mutter.

He smiles. “It’s the age of my hot girlfriend.”

“Well, okay, when you put it that way.”

I do it again.

And this time, when I kick (and give it the extra push, like Taz showed me), I feel myself lifting into the air.

“That’s it!” Taz shouts. “You’re flying.”

Holy—

It’s the most amazing feeling. I’m actually flying!

“Floe—you’re going farther than I ever have!”

I’m gliding in the air like a bird. I can’t believe it! I’m—
soaring!

I can do anything, I think giddily.

I come floating softly down. “That was amazing,” I say.

“But I probably won’t be able to do it again—”

He puts a finger to my lips. “For a blader girl, you’re a bit too insecure.” He smiles at me, so I know he’s teasing.

I sigh. “I know.”

I Was a Teenage Popsicle

He looks at me. "In a lot of ways, you're stronger and braver than I am."

I snort. "Yeah, right."

"I have a confession to make." He looks at me. "I've actually . . . not had such an easy time getting used to everything. I was being a macho jerk, trying to make you think everything was great."

"I didn't think Venice Beach guys did macho." I try to keep my voice even. I'm actually a little angry. For so long, he made me think *I* was the only one having trouble getting used to stuff!

"They—I—usually don't. Forgive me?"

I ask you, how can you not forgive a guy who says, "Forgive me?" It's humanly impossible. It's even impossible for a recently thawed zombie.

"Done," I mutter. "So what have you been having trouble with?"

He looks away. "Everything. Friends, holographic teachers, schedulers. I was too embarrassed to tell you. Venice Beach is changing, big-time."

"So I've heard," I say.

"Yeah, well, I'm dealing with it."

I nod. "That's . . . good."

"Enough about me. What's happening with the bracelets?"

I sigh. "Look, Taz, given what you're going through, maybe you don't think cryonics is such a good idea. I don't want to force you to help me. And I don't want to lean on you . . ."

"First of all," he says evenly, "nobody could ever force me to do anything I didn't want to do. Secondly, it sounds like you need all the help you can get. I can't believe what your sister—"

"How do you know what my sister did?" I demand.

"Halley told me when you went to the bathroom at the food court. Don't blame her. I forced it out of her."

"It's not Sunny's fault," I say. And I realize I truly believe that. "She had to grow up under pretty tough circumstances."

"Yeah, okay, but I still can't believe you're taking this all on yourself." He shakes his head. "I've been so freakin' selfish. Your parents . . . Listen, Floe, I *want* you to lean on me." He takes my hand and says, "Have I told you I think you're amazing?"

"No," I whisper. "Feel free."

Abe was wrong, I decide. People *should* lean on people.

"You're amazing," he murmurs.

"More amazing than Sari?" I ask, unable to help myself (once again), and hoping he'll clarify their status once and for all.

He rolls his eyes. "Can you say fickle? She's totally into the whole space-age thing now, with some guy named Janex."

Hooray! She's out of the picture!

He looks at me. "What about Superman?"

"Kalel? He's all Halley's. She just doesn't know it yet."

He grins, and before I know it, he's pulling me close to him and kissing me a second time.

I Was a Teenage Popsicle

The second time is even better than the first.

I still have no idea if I'm his official girlfriend or not, but I have to say, I don't much care at the moment . . .

Later, sitting in Halley's basement, putting the finishing touches on the bracelet prototypes, Halley says, "So, Floe, when your parents come back, I guess you're gonna go back to Venice Beach."

I look at her. "That's probably where they'll want to live. Why?"

She looks at me. "I'll miss you."

"Ha!" I say lightly. "Once Ashleigh's back, you'll forget we were ever friends."

"Sooo not true!" she returns, miffed.

"I know." I grin. "Speaking of Ashleigh, have you heard anything?" I can afford to be charitable now.

She shakes her head. "Apparently, she has pneumonia. I've called a lot, and delivered her homework, but I haven't seen her—her mom just takes her stuff."

"Poor Ashleigh," I say, meaning it.

"Yeah, poor Ashleigh," Taz echoes. He came along to help.

We work in silence for a while.

"So," Halley says softly. "What was it like?"

Taz and I look at each other. We know what she's asking.

"I don't remember feeling any pain," I say. "I guess I was pretty medicated toward the end, lucky for me."

"Same here."

"And then, when I—woke up—I was disoriented, and it's

the shock of the situation that gets you more than the physical weakness.”

“But we had each other,” Taz murmurs.

I smile at him.

“Aw, you guys are the cutest frozen zombies ever,” Halley says.

I hit her in the arm.

“So, Taz, got any guys for me in Venice Beach?” she says.

He grins. “Nobody that would stack up to Superman.”

“I take it you mean Kael. He’s off limits.”

“Sorry, he hasn’t been with—what did you tell me her name was?”

“Ashleigh,” I supply. Halley glares at me.

“Right—he hasn’t been going out with Ashleigh for, how long?”

“A year,” mumbles Halley. “But Kael’s not into me.”

“You kidding me? He’s probably just been holding back cuz he thinks *you’re* not into *him*.”

“That’s what I said!” I exclaim. Turning to Halley triumphantly, I say, “So what do you think now?”

“You know, that *Mean Girls* rule about not dating friends’ exes is kinda dumb,” Halley says.

“You said it,” I tell her.

“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.

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

“Floe, I can’t promise . . . 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 Cullens.”

“But,” I say, forcing myself to be optimistic (not a natural state), “if people end up loving the bracelets and there’s this whole groundswell of support, who knows? Maybe the Cullens will drop the suit.”

“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 and risk losing face, and he seems to be running the show where the Cullens 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.

"You sound tired," I say.

He laughs. "Yes, well, we're not getting much sleep. So yes, we're sleepy, but we're hanging in there."

"Are those reporters keeping you up at night?" I demand.

"Yes, that's it."

"No, it's not! It's something worse! Don't treat me like I'm five, Doc!"

He sighs. "Well, the truth is, there's been a lot of nighttime vandalism, people trying to get in and so forth."

"Oh my God! And you don't even have security there!" I'm worried for my parents. *Please don't harm my parents*, I mentally plead with the universe.

"We do now," he says grimly.

"Thank God," I breathe.

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

"Dixon?" he asks.

I Was a Teenage Popsicle

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

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

Uh-oh.

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

“Well, yeah. I think 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 *du jour*, specializing in family relations. She’s terrifyingly strict and bizarrely insulting for a person in her field. She reminds me of that chick on the show in the early 2000s—the one who kept saying, “You are the weakest link!”

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 clear something up.”

“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. Yeah," he adds at the surprised look on my face (these two actually *talked?*), "she told me what she used to dream about. The house, the lifestyle, the whole bit."

"Wow," is all I can think of to say. "But once you found out . . ."

He looks at me. "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.

I Was a Teenage Popsicle

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 says. "The pay sucks, but at least I can try to do my bit." 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 tell you?"

"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."

Hey, you can't expect me to go from zero to gushy just like that.

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 I'm dying to get out and do something. And I can't wait for something big to happen." She grins

I Was a Teenage Popsicle

sheepishly when she adds, "It may never happen. I can take Jake over to Marissa's house. Her nanny's okay with it."

Marissa doesn't have a job, but she employs a nanny for those pesky hair and manicure appointments.

"If I split the cost of help, it means I'll actually get to keep some of my earnings."

"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 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 . . .*

But the bracelet thing *does* end up working. Big time. (Though precisely how big, I'm not quite sure. I haven't received my first check yet.) Halley's dad did, indeed, love the prototypes we created in Halley's basement, found subcontractors to quickly produce them in quantity, and put them at the front of all his Crystal Hut stores. They were an instant and humongous hit.

"Can you believe this?" I say to Taz and Halley less than a month later. We're sitting in beauty salon chairs waiting to get our makeup done for our appearance on—get this—*The Rob and Casey Show!* I've come to love Rob and Casey, sort of a cross between Nick and Jessica (pre-split) and Regis and Kelly. (Unlike rock-and-rollers, TV personalities are not allowed to limp on forever.)

I Was a Teenage Popsicle

Emma, who arranged the whole thing, is in the corner, deep in conversation with a producer.

Halley shakes her head. "It's, like, surreal."

"Unbelievable," Taz murmurs.

"Hey, guys!" A really cool-looking makeup artist in a white unitard and funky black glasses comes in and says teasingly, "Everybody get lots of sleep last night?"

Halley laughs. "Yeah, right."

She pulls Halley's hair back in a ponytail. "I love red-heads. Fab freckles. Great look."

Halley grimaces.

"No, really! You could model. I'm *totally* serious."

Halley looks at me, wide-eyed. I nod in confirmation.

She comes over to me and touches my skin. "Oh my God, you have the most *fabulous* skin. What do you use?"

Liquid nitrogen, Z30, and F9B, I think.

Fortunately, it's a rhetorical question. She moves to Taz. "You, too. All three of you should be, like, strutting down catwalks in Milan."

"Aw, I bet you say that to all the guests," Taz says.

"No, I don't. Trust me. I'm gonna have fun working on you guys."

And she does. So does the hair guy. The two of them manage to make us look like the kind of Hollywood teens who make regular teens feel the need to utilize pricey and overhyped skin care products (the latest being an astringent made from cat urine).

"Don't be nervous," says the makeup artist, whose

nametag identifies her as Trina. “Rob and Casey are great. A production assistant will be here in a minute to take you over to the green room, and Rob and Casey will come in and say hi before the show.”

My eyes widen. “They’re gonna—talk to us?”

Trina laughs. “Of course.” She winks. “Have fun.”

About a second after she leaves, a harried-looking, black-clad PA comes in and says, “Taz Taber, Floe Ryan, and Halley Rogers? You guys ready?”

“Yup,” Taz says.

She gives us a quick smile. “Great. You look terrific. I’m Marg. Follow me.”

Emma and the producer join us as we walk toward the green room at a lightning pace; Marg rattles off a spiel full of tips on what to do and not to do while being interviewed. (“Do smile a lot. Don’t say ‘um.’”) When she finishes, she smiles brightly at us and says, “Easy as pie, right?”

We stare at her.

She laughs. “No, really. Most of that stuff is just common sense. So make yourself comfortable in here. Help yourself to coffee and something to eat—though you might want to stick to water so as not to mess up your makeup or get your clothes stained. Rob and Casey will be along in a minute.”

With that, she’s off—it’s almost like she’s disappeared in a poof of smoke.

“No getting nervous,” Emma orders us as she shepherds us into the room. “You’re naturals.”

I Was a Teenage Popsicle

“Hey, guys,” a familiar voice says. We all turn to look at a bunch of musicians on a couch.

Holy crap—it’s the *Next Door Boys*, who were already getting big when I croaked, and who are now attempting what must be their tenth comeback. They’re looking a little long in the tooth to still be earnestly crooning teenybopper ballads, but hey, whatever works for them.

Omigod, I used to have the biggest crush on D.J.! (Though I would have died before letting anyone at VBA know!)

He still looks amazing.

But—are those *gray streaks* in his hair?

Nevis holds up his arm. He’s wearing a “Frozen Zombies Rule” bracelet. “Great stuff, guys!”

“Thanks,” I say. I sneak a glance at Halley. She’s frozen in place.

Emma’s grinning like a Cheshire cat.

“You knew about this, didn’t you?” I whisper.

“You bet I did,” she whispers back.

“So,” I manage to say, “are you guys on today, too?” (Duh. Could I come up with a more inane question?)

“Yeah, we’re performing our new single,” Karl says.

I sneak a glance at Halley again. She’s still frozen.

“What if Halley’s like this the whole time?” I whisper to Emma.

“She won’t be,” she assures me.

I’m skeptical. “Halley, say something,” I whisper.

“Can’t,” she chokes out.

I decide Emma's probably right. She'll come to eventually. (Actually, I just don't want to waste energy worrying about Halley when *the Next Door Boys are in the room!*)

Taz is looking at Byron's guitar. "Nice guitar," he says. "I didn't know you guys played."

Byron says, "We didn't use to. On stage, anyway. We're trying to switch it up a little bit, show people we're not just pretty boys who can harmonize. Can't coast on that rep forever."

With that, Taz enters into a spirited discussion with Byron about guitars and great guitarists.

A few minutes later, Rob and Casey walk in.

"Hey, guys," Casey says, still sounding like the cheerleader I'm sure she once was. She's wearing a bright orange unitard and orange boots. Her hair is perfect, her smile dazzling. I'm guessing she's closer to thirty than twenty, but her face doesn't reveal any obvious signs of "work," though I'm sure she's had stuff done. What Sunny said was true: these days, everybody over the age of twenty does have "check-ups" every six months or so.

All the guys in the room—except Taz, bless his formerly frozen heart—are sitting up a bit straighter now. Casey may be the mother of three-year-old twins, but she's the ultimate hot mama.

"Everybody good?" she asks, flipping her hair.

We all murmur assent, and Rob nods to the guys. "Nice to see you again, boys."

"Boys?" Nevis says, amused.

I Was a Teenage Popsicle

"Compared to him," D.J. cracks.

I'm guessing Rob's quite a few years older than Casey, though, again, it's hard to tell. Even the guys are into the cosmetic work, big-time.

"Hey, watch it, or I'll skewer you on live television," Rob says, smiling. He looks over to me and Halley and Taz. "Great job on those bracelets, gang. You must have more money than Bill Gates by now."

We all laugh. Halley looks a bit more relaxed now, thank God.

"Love them!" Casey says, holding up an arm. She's wearing a pink and orange crystal-studded one that says, "Frozen and Fabulous."

The three of us look at each other and grin stupidly.

"So Marg gave you the rundown, right?" Casey asks.

"Yeah," I say.

"Excellent," Rob says. "You three are on first, then the boys will perform. Break a leg, okay?"

Still grinning stupidly, we nod.

Trina comes in to powder our noses again, and then we watch Rob and Casey's opening spiel and song (which I actually enjoy, despite my alt roots!) on the TV suspended from the green room ceiling. At the first commercial, Marg comes in, mikes us, and says crisply, "Okay, guys, follow me."

She and Emma take us to the wings. Marg explains that we're to wait there until Rob and Casey introduce us. Rob and Casey are on their stools, getting their makeup touched

up. When Trina comes off the stage, she whispers, "Break a leg."

"I wish people wouldn't say that quite so much," I murmur.

Taz squeezes my arm reassuringly. "You'll be fine."

I touch Halley's arm. "You okay?"

She grins. "Better than okay."

"Not thinking much about Kaleb now, are you?" I say teasingly.

"Um, not much, no."

We whisper excitedly among ourselves for a couple of minutes, and then Marg comes up behind us and holds her finger up to her mouth. Someone says, "In three . . . two . . . one," and we all look at Rob and Casey.

"So, Casey, speaking of bracelets . . ."

Casey looks out at the audience. "Uh, Rob, we weren't talking about bracelets."

"Work with me here, Casey, it's what we in show business call a segue."

"Ah, yes, a segue," Casey says, still looking at the audience and rolling her eyes.

Now Rob looks out at the audience, and waits a beat before turning back to Casey and saying, "I see you're wearing a very special bracelet today. Not your usual gold and diamond one."

"That's right, Rob."

"It's pink," Rob comments.

"It is," Casey confirms, looking at the audience again, in

I Was a Teenage Popsicle

her can-you-believe-this-guy way. *I* can't believe this ancient daytime talk show shtick is still cluttering up the airwaves, but despite my Venice Beach-y cynicism, I find myself grinning.

"And it says, 'Frozen and Fabulous,'" Rob reads. "So this is one of those bracelets we've been hearing about—the ones designed by those Venice Beach teens to help save the Cryonics Center over there."

"That's right, Rob," Casey says. Holding her arm out, she says, "Can the cameras pick this up? They're really cute. The straps are rubber or leather—this one's rubber. They have sort of a retro feel. But they also have a few crystals studded on."

"So, Casey, what do you think about this whole cryonics thing? Would you like to be frozen?"

"You know, Rob, I haven't really thought about it," she says. "I just like the bracelets."

Rob looks at the audience. "So you bought a bracelet supporting the cryonics cause, but you don't know if you support the cause."

"Well, it's a pretty controversial cause," Casey says. "There's a lot to think about."

"Yes, but either you believe in it, or not."

"Well, let's bring out the young people behind the bracelets, which are selling like hotcakes all over the country, and see what they have to say. Ladies and gentlemen, please welcome Floe Ryan, Taz Taber, and Halley Rogers."

I hear Emma whispering, "Break a leg." Holy crap—I

can't believe we're actually stepping onto the *Rob and Casey* stage!

This whole thing has been so bizarre. The bracelets are a more ginormous success than I could even have imagined. Skedpets have nothing on this trend. We take our places on the couch beside Rob and Casey.

"Before we start bombarding you with questions—I'm kidding, of course—why don't you three introduce yourselves to our studio audience," Rob says.

I'm the first one sitting beside them. "I'm Floe Ryan," I manage to say without stumbling.

"I'm Taz Taber," Taz says, brushing an errant lock of dark hair from his eyes. Crap. Girls all over the country are gonna go nuts over him.

"I'm Halley Rogers," Halley says, her confidence back now that the Next Door Boys are safely out of sight.

"So, kids, this is the hottest fad to hit since the Skedpet. Why do you think these bracelets are so popular?"

"Well, they're a bit different looking," I say.

"So retro," Casey says, flipping her hair. "I love them—they're totally 2006!"

"That's right," I say. "That's the look we were going for," I wink surreptitiously at Taz. "And Taz here came up with the sayings on them."

"Like 'Frozen and Fabulous,'" Rob says for the audience's benefit. "Mr. Taber here is the one responsible for the messages, I believe, and Ms. Rogers is the business brains behind the operation."

I Was a Teenage Popsicle

“That’s right, Rob,” Halley says proudly. “My family owns the Crystal Hut.”

“The accessory chain,” Casey pipes up. “Great store.”

“Thanks.” Halley smiles proudly. “I was sure people would love the bracelets, and my father agreed.”

“Well, sure he did,” Rob says. “He’s a successful businessman. And he’s in the business of trends. He obviously knows a winner when he sees it. But tell me, why take on the Cryonics Center cause?”

“Well, Rob,” Taz says, “we don’t see the harm in helping people live longer.”

“Now hold on, it’s not exactly living longer, it’s bringing people back from the dead.”

“In the future, the definition of ‘dead’ may change,” I say. “People may not be pronounced dead until hours after their hearts stop.” Smiling, I add, “It may just be a generational thing. People our age love all that zombie stuff.”

“Which is, I guess, why the bracelets have been so successful,” Rob says.

“That and because they’re so great looking,” Casey says, giving Rob a little push and rolling her eyes.

“Well, that goes without saying. Of course they’re great looking. And you guys deserve every penny you’re raking in. If you happen to have any left over, consider throwing some my way. There’s a vacation place in Hawaii I have my eye on.”

“I have the feeling you’re doing okay on your own,” Taz says, grinning.

“Yeah, but I’m getting up there in years. Hey, maybe I’ll have myself frozen, and when I’m brought back to life, I’ll buy the place in Hawaii.”

We all laugh.

“Seriously, do you guys really believe in this stuff? It’s kinda creepy and weird, don’t you think?”

Taz and I exchange looks. “Rob,” I say, “not only do we believe in it, we think it’s going to happen—in a big way—sooner than people think.”

We’ve been warned they don’t want to get into the controversial aspects of the issue too deeply, which, I guess, is why Rob now steers the conversation away from a scientific debate, and soon Casey’s thanking us for coming on the show.

“You were awesome, guys!” Emma says.

“Good interview,” D.J. says once we’re back in the wings, where his group is waiting to go on.

“Thanks,” I say. “Break a leg.”

“Thanks.”

We chat for a few more minutes—*we’re chatting with the Next Door Boys!*—and then we’re taken back to the green room, where we watch Rob introduce them with the words, “And now, a group that’s had more second chances at life than any cryonically preserved human ever will—the Next Door Boys!”

They sing their latest hit, “Freaky Love” (I now realize why they’ve been booked), and Emma says, “Okay, guys—time to hit MTV!”

I Was a Teenage Popsicle

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 closes all the way. "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?"

"Girl stuff," 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. Not scary-intimidating, just scary-out-of-it. He seems to be in a sort of trancelike state. He was keeping it together until I came along. Clearly, the whole I-was-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 ultramodern, ultraexpensive-looking living room. He sits in a Lucite chair. I sit on a black leather couch opposite him.

I Was a Teenage Popsicle

"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. Just Emma. You met her at the airport." I don't really want to talk about that night, for fear he'll turn into *that* guy again. "Now she knows the truth, but when I first saw her again, I made her think it just took a long time to recover, and that the treatment stunted my growth."

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."

Yesterday—heck, a half hour ago—I would have thought, *Two snakes*, but now I just think it's nice that they're 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 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, "you can't plan a funeral for Ashleigh if you think you might want to bring her back. Dr. Dixon doesn't want this to be made public until there are more of us. 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 give my regards to your wife."

"The door's over there," he murmurs. "You can show yourself out."

I stand and stare 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 persuade the Cullens 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 so sick and dying."

"No, not at all," he says soberly. "Bea's close to getting the cure for this particular strain of lymphaticosis approved, but if Ashleigh passes away, there's no guarantee we'll be able to revive her. As you know, you were pronounced dead just a few minutes after your heart stopped, which, by today's standards, is premature. But if Ashleigh passes she'll be well and truly dead." He pauses. "I'm working on something that might help us—a new, stronger defibrillator—but I haven't tested it yet."

I have no response.

"She's about to go, Floe."

"Good luck," I say after a moment.

"Thanks. We'll need it."

It isn't until the wee hours of the morning that I get the news that Ashleigh's passed on.

Nobody else knows. Jones is hoping she'll be revived and cured shortly, and life will continue on as normal.

Okay, scratch that *nobody else knows* stuff. I immediately call Halley when I get the news.

"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, Halley. 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. It’s gonna happen. She’s gonna come back.”

At least, I can only hope so.

A week later, Bea has her approval.

It's time to devitrify, revive, and cure Ashleigh.

If she can be revived.

Taz and Halley and I are waiting outside the devitrification/revival room. Ashleigh's parents are waiting in an inner room, just off the revival area.

We're all pacing.

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

"Too jittery," Halley 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." Halley's back to pacing. "In a few months, I might be the only nonfreak 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. “She’ll give as good as she gets.”

“And what happens to kids at schools where there’s no Ashleigh?” Halley asks.

“Halley, 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 *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*-type future—which would be okay if it were filled with witty banter with pals and dates with cute he-monsters—but I’ve just now realized that along with all that, I’ll also have to deal with that annoying always-having-to-watch-my-back-in-case-someone’s-trying-to-kill-me thing.

I shake my head. What am I, crazy? Life is not a TV show.

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

It sounds like *ER*.

— — —

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.”

I Was a Teenage Popsicle

"But—you have the cure!" Halley cries.

"It's not the cure that's the problem," Taz says.

"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."

Taz finishes for me. "But by today's standards, Ashleigh really is dead," he says softly.

"So there's . . . no hope?"

Bea looks at us, as if debating whether to tell us something. "There is one thing we can try. We've revitrified her—did so as soon as we realized the revival process wasn't going to work, before her brain began to deteriorate—and if Congressman Jones agrees, we can try it in a few days."

"He's never gonna go for it," I say, shaking my head. "This was a onetime chance. He's probably more anticryonics now than ever."

"What is it you want to try?" Taz asks Bea curiously.

"It's a kind of superstrength defibrillator Abe's been working on."

"Right," I murmur. "He mentioned he was working on that. But it's untested," I say.

"Yes."

"Like I said, Jones'll never go for it."

"Floe, you can talk him into it," Halley says wildly. "I know you can! We have to persuade 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, superstrength defibrillator on her? He’ll never agree.”

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

Halley 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. They still haven’t cottoned on to the fact that I’m a frozen zombie, never mind that Ashleigh’s been frozen, too. “Floe, you need a lift back, right?”

“Nah, I guess I’ll stick around. Bum a ride off somebody else.”

Taz smiles and sits on a vinyl couch.

“Aren’t you going home?” I say.

“Are you kidding? I can’t wait to see the look on Jones’s face when he learns there are two of us.”

What a guy.

When Jones sees us, he just turns away, doesn’t even acknowledge us.

“Mr. Jones—wait!” I shout.

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

Taz is faster than me. When he catches up to him, he says, “Sir, we just wanted to talk to you. We wanted to let you know how sorry we are things didn’t go as planned.”

I Was a Teenage Popsicle

"Thank you," he says shortly.

I break in. "If we 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 usually looks smashing—if slightly skeletal (except for the breast implants)—in the gossip columns. Today, she just looks like, well, 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?

"I'm another one," Taz adds.

Jones starts. "There are two of you?"

"Yes," I admit. "I didn't tell you earlier because I wasn't sure Taz—this is Taz Taber, by the way—wanted me to."

Taz holds out his hand. "Pleased to meet you, sir. Ma'am."

Mrs. Jones is still staring at us. "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 them!" she cries. "They're alive! They're more than alive—they're 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, Dick," 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, everything I've done, 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."

A week after that, we're back at the hospital. When Bea bursts into the waiting room and announces that the devit-rification, revival, and cure administration have all gone smoothly this time, huge shouts of glee rise up.

"Can she see us now?" Halley 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!" Halley cries. Then she shrugs. "Wanna hit the strip?"

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

“Mr. Jones!” Halley 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 few ways.”

He nods. “I’ll do my best to persuade the Cullens 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 a hard concept 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 bright green, crystal-studded bracelet that says, “Frozen Zombies Rule.”

We all crack up.

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

I Was a Teenage Popsicle

"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 that."

I shrug. "It was hard. For a while. It's not so hard now."

"What things were new to you?"

"Oh, just about everything—Skedpets, holographic teachers, hoverblading."

She grins. "I could tell."

"I was a kickin' inline 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 popping 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. Kalel’s all yours.”

She looks at me. “I’m sorry about that, too. God, I’ve been such an idiot. You know, Halley likes him.”

“You think?” I ask innocently.

“I know. So what the heck was I doing, trying to hold on to him when he doesn’t even like me?”

“I’m sure he—”

“Well, 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—” she thinks hard for a minute—“do volunteer work in South Central!”

I nearly choke myself when I hear that. “Ash, give yourself some time. Take things slowly.” Not in a million years will Ashleigh Jones ever set foot in South Central L.A., I think.

“You’ll see,” she says.

“Maybe that’s a tad too ambitious,” I venture. “Maybe you should start out at a local community center or something.”

“Ha, thinking small is for small people. Look at what you and your old friend and Halley and—what’s that guy’s name?”

I Was a Teenage Popsicle

"Taz," I supply.

"Yeah, Taz. Look at what you guys 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 it's my turn to choke. "Right," I say when I've regained control.

"So I heard you met the Next Door Boys."

"Yeah, that was pretty cool."

"I guess," she says. "Though, now that I'm planning to be all involved in important causes I won't have time for shallow stuff like that any more."

I try to keep a straight face. "Right."

"When I *was* into stuff like that, I thought D.J. was the cutest."

"He's pretty cute," I acknowledge.

"But Nevis is kinda cute, too."

"Even cuter in person," I agree.

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 lamest thing I've ever heard."

Suddenly, Mrs. Jones snaps her fingers. "I know just the thing. What do you think of having a hoverblading party?"

I feel a slow grin break out on my face. I look at Ashleigh. She's grinning, too. "A hoverblading party," I say slowly. "Perfect!"

“Not a bad turnout,” Emma comments.

“Yeah, not bad at all,” I say. I look at her. “Does it bug you that the majority of the guests are sixteen?”

She laughs. “Not at all. Actually, I just had a very interesting conversation with the Dixons—outside, where no one could hear us.”

“Oh?” I look at her curiously. “Do tell.”

She grins. “I’m going to teach dance part-time.”

“At the—?”

She nods.

“Emma—that’s great!”

Jones managed to persuade the Cullens to drop the lawsuit (without letting on that his own daughter was a frozen zombie), and now it’s full speed ahead!

"It is. I've really missed dancing. It used to be such a big part of me. It'll be great for me to get back into it."

"Not to mention great for the people you'll be teaching."

"I'll definitely be filling a void at the center."

"That's sooo cool! I wish there was something I could do there."

"There probably is," Emma says.

"Yeah, right. I don't think I'm qualified to be a hov-erblading instructor, seeing as I just caught on days ago."

She grins. "But I've heard from a certain person whose initials are T.T. that you've barely taken them off until now."

"Hey, I have a rep, you know? And I'm going to be showing off in a bit. So even though you're like, ancient, and need your beauty sleep, don't even think about leaving early."

"Wouldn't dream of it." She looks at me. "Back to what you could do at the center—" She breaks off. "Maybe we should go outside."

I nod, and we go out to the front of the building.

Once we're seated on a bench, she says, "Maybe you could suggest to Dixon that you be a peer reintegration counselor or something."

"You know," I say slowly, "that's not a bad idea." Lord knows, I could have used a friend who'd been through it.

"I never have bad ideas."

"Well, there *was* that time in seventh grade when you told Billy Herman he had B.O."

I Was a Teenage Popsicle

She sighs. "I thought he'd appreciate it."

"Are you still as forthcoming with your present-day boyfriends?"

"Unfortunately, yes. Which may explain why I'm currently boyfriend-free."

"Who cares? Look how much fun you're having!"

She grins slyly. "Speaking of fun, how 'bout you do that showing off now?"

I grin back. "Another winner of an idea. Let's go."

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

My heart's beating a hundred miles a minute, but I know I can do it. I've flown about a thousand times since my date with Taz. I recognize the adrenaline rush from my blading days. I'm not afraid of it. It doesn't have anything to do with success or failure—just excitement.

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 kick Taz taught me, 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," Halley squeals when I get off the

floor to thunderous applause. "Incredible form! 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. "And speaking of better than good"—she turns to Halley—"how are things going with your boyfriend?"

"Um, fine." Halley blushes furiously. When I first met her, I would never have guessed she'd be the type to blush (despite her being a pale-skinned redhead), but I've come to see a different side of her over the last little while. Even more in the last couple weeks, since she's become Kalel's one and only. Turned out Taz was right. He'd always liked her, just held back cuz he thought she didn't like him.

We may have Skedpets and holographic teachers now, but it turns out a lot about high school hasn't changed. I don't know if it's reassuring or horrifying that a hundred years from now, guys and girls are still going to be playing head games.

"Aw, look how cute she is, blushing," Ashleigh says teasingly.

Speaking of people who've changed . . . Ash really is volunteering in South Central L.A.! 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

I Was a Teenage Popsicle

little showing off himself. In the past, I might have thought it was a shrewd political move—a way to get down with the homies, in outdated parlance. But he, like his daughter, is different now. I guess it's true what they say: you don't know what you've got till it's gone. In Ashleigh's case, the "it" was her life, and in her father's, the "it" was her. Jones, like Ash, seems newly dedicated to politics, actually interested in helping people rather than promoting his own agenda.

"You know, Floe," Jones continues, "it's occurred to me you'd be a whiz in politics. You should really think about it as a future career."

Careers. Jeez. I have to start seriously thinking about all that stuff. University's looming in a couple of 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 yet 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 out hoverblading or sketching on the beach.

With Taz.

Speaking of whom.

"How's my girlfriend?" he murmurs, sneaking up behind me and putting his arms around me.

"I'm gr—" Wait a minute . . . he said *girlfriend!* Hallelu-

jah! Saints be praised! I finally know where I stand! And hello, I have a *boyfriend!*

Jones has gone back to his wife, who's busy treating the waitstaff badly, and Ash and Halley have stepped onto the hoverblading floor with Kael.

"Great," I say, smiling at Taz, my heart tripping a little bit, as it always does when I'm around him. He looks sensational tonight, in a camouflage-patterned unitard, and he's getting more than his fair share of interested looks from Cactus Hill girls. I've already perfected my don't-even-think-about-it-he's-mine stare.

"How's my . . . boyfriend?" Ooh, I tingle all over when I say it!

"Same," he says, grinning. He looks around. I know exactly what he's thinking.

"Who'da thunk it, huh?"

"How do you think they'd react if they knew?" he asks.

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

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

"Yeah, I know."

"It's gonna be tough."

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

"It's gonna be tougher."

"I'm ready."

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

I nudge him in the side with my elbow. "Whatever. Wanna learn something new, hotshot?"

I Was a Teenage Popsicle

“Sure.” He waggles his eyebrow.

I hit his arm and pull a brochure out of my jeans pocket. He looks at it. “You’ve got to be kidding.”

“C’mon,” I plead. “It’ll be fun. Don’tcha think it’ll be fun?”

He shakes his head. “Mastering hoverblading wasn’t enough for you?”

“But Taz—hoverkarting! Doesn’t it sound wild?”

“A combination of go-karting and hoverblading?” he says, examining the picture on the front.

“Exactly!” I say excitedly. “We’ve gotta try it!”

“Course we do.” He grins.

Just then, Kalel, Ash, and Halley start to fly and we all hoot and holler. (Though I’m pleased to announce that the reaction to my hoverblading was significantly bigger and better.)

Taz turns to me. “Did I tell you you were amazing out there?”

“Yup,” I say, “I was. Now there are just a couple more things I have to do before this little adventure is over.”

He 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.”

He gives me a quick peck on the cheek and says, “I have the feeling you’re *always* gonna have something to prove.”

“That’s a wonderful idea, Floe,” Abe says when I ask about becoming a peer counselor. It’s a few days after the hoverblading party—and two days after the prom, where I did, indeed, dazzle the Cactus Hill student body with my newly acquired popping expertise, courtesy of Emma. “Having gone through it, you’ll be able to identify so many gaps for our teens—things we missed.”

“You didn’t miss that many,” I say charitably. Now that I can pop with the best of them, I can afford to be generous. “Maybe you should aim for getting someone in their twenties, someone in their thirties, and forties, and so on,” I say. “Every age group has different needs.”

“Another brilliant idea,” Bea says approvingly.

“Not my own,” I admit. “Emma’s.”

Being interviewed by the latest prepubescent MTV deejay is even more surreal. Everybody knows Rob and Casey, but MTV has teen cred. More important, 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. At the Los Angeles airport, we're met by none other than a semidisguised (glasses, slouchy hat) Congressman Dick Jones.

"Crap," Emma mutters. "I knew I shouldn't have let you guys talk me out of hiring bodyguards."

I look at Halley, 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's best friend, and Ashleigh Jones' father has been campaigning against our cause.

He must be furious.

I definitely can't consider Halley a "half friend" anymore. She's the real deal. I knew that after she screamed her apology to me in the hallway at school. That was pretty big. But this is even bigger.

I'm actually overwhelmed by how much she's done for me.

So overwhelmed, I kind of miss it when Jones moves up to her swiftly, practically pushing his face right into hers and says very quietly (so strangers won't realize what a nutbar he is), "Halley, this girl is dangerous. Don't align yourself with her."

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

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

Halley puts her hand on my shoulder and shakes her head. "It's okay, Floe." She looks straight at Jones. "You're wrong."

"Excuse me, Congressman Jones," Emma says firmly, grabbing our arms and leading us off to the side, motioning Taz, who's staring down Jones, to follow. "Just ignore him," she says quietly.

But Jones tags along closely behind, making it hard to ig-

I Was a Teenage Popsicle

nore him. "I treated you like a daughter, Halley," he says menacingly (but still quietly).

Taz twirls around and says, just as quietly (if we make a scene, Jones will claim *we're* harassing *him*), "This is harassment, *sir*, and if you don't put a lid on it, I'm calling airport security. If I don't clock you first."

Wow, Taz is in full-on hero mode. That definitely does strange things to my insides.

Jones stops following us, but says threateningly, "You'll pay for this." (I swear, he really says this.)

"You okay?" I ask Halley in the cab on the way home. Emma and Taz are piled in, too. They want to make sure we get home safely before they head back to Venice Beach.

"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," Emma commands her. "I've met dozens of guys like him. People who try to use fear to keep others from speaking out."

"You really think he's harmless?" I ask, worried.

"Oh, yeah. In the grand scheme of things, he's not all that powerful."

I put my arm around Halley. "You were really brave back there," I murmur.

"You said it," Taz echoes.

She smiles weakly. "Thanks, guys. And thanks for protecting me. That—wasn't fun."

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

“I *was* Ashleigh’s best friend.”

We’re all silent for a minute.

And then Halley says, “So don’t you guys think Nevis is definitely the cutest Next Door Boy?”

I grin. “I’m a D.J. girl, myself.”

“I thought Rob was pretty cute,” Emma puts in.

“I’m all about the girls who were on the show before the Boys,” Taz says.

We all laugh.

I put my head back on the car seat. “What a ride. Being frozen, meeting the Next Door Boys. I tell ya, nothing will ever surprise me again.”

And nothing does—until I get home and Sunny hands me the first check for my share of the profits on the bracelets.

Well, actually, she hands me the envelope holding the check. I immediately call up Emma and Halley and Taz, who are over in a flash. Well, Halley’s a bit late. Her mom’s a tad peeved that she’s running out again so soon after coming home. Her dad—having sent me the check—totally understands. Taz’s parents, being from Venice Beach, are totally fine with his self-made schedule.

“Well?” Sunny says once everybody’s in the living room sitting in a circle on the floor around the envelope.

“What if it’s not as much as we think?” I ask.

Halley rolls her eyes. “Floe, do you think we would have

I Was a Teenage Popsicle

gotten booked on *Rob and Casey* and MTV if the bracelets weren't absolutely huge?"

"Emma's a good PR person."

She grins. "I'm good, but I'm not *that* good."

Slowly, I pick up the envelope.

"Oh, for Pete's sake," Andrew says, grabbing it out of my hand and ripping it open.

A huge grin spreads out over his face. He hands the check to Sunny.

Who starts to cry and hugs me so tightly, I think I'm going to choke. When she pulls away, she hands the check to me.

I stare.

"Well?" Taz says.

I hand it to him.

"Holy . . ."

"Lemme see that," Halley says, grabbing it. Her eyes turn round as saucers. "Holy hoverblades!"

She hands it to Emma.

Who says, smiling, "No more sympathy discounts for you. Full fee from now on."

I grin. "You've got it."

— — —

The next day, Taz and I go to the center to present the Dixons with their share of the spoils. We've even brought along some (nonalcoholic) fruit punch. The reporters have thinned out, as 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 Cullens.

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 at the airport.

Bea exclaims, "Why, that awful man!"

Abe shakes his head. "Not awful. Just sure he's right. But it's hard to convince most people. In some cases, nothing short of losing their own loved ones will make them see the light," Abe says. "And sometimes not even that." He looks down at the check. "This is truly remarkable," he says solemnly, "especially since we've failed you both so miserably. I'm truly sorry we weren't able to give both of you more reintegration support."

Embarrassed, I say, "Hey, 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 faced—and overcome—so many other challenges these past few months: a move, a new school, and a new guardian . . . your younger sister, who's now your older sister, which was a shock in itself."

I Was a Teenage Popsicle

He's right, I think, surprised.

But when I get home and receive a phone call from a tearful Halley telling me Ashleigh's illness has worsened considerably, and has finally been diagnosed as, not pneumonia at all, but a new strain of lymphaticosis for which there's no cure, I wonder if I have it in me to face my next, most impossible challenge . . .

I take a cab to Jones's house (there's a distinct advantage to having money), after talking to Bea and finding out she's awaiting FDA approval on the cure for this newest strain of lymphaticosis.

Can I really go forward with my plan? I wonder. What if Jones 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

I Was a Teenage Popsicle

"Ah, Emma. Delightful young woman. So glad you sent her our way, though"—Abe gives me a semidisapproving look—"telling her the whole story was risky."

"It was a risk that paid off," I say.

"You're lucky," Abe points out.

"I'm a good judge of character."

"Just be careful in the future," Bea says, looking at Abe.

"Sounds ominous. Why are you looking at him? What's going on?"

"Well . . . we're planning to thaw a whole lot more people over the next few months," Abe says.

"Before someone decides to sue us again," Bea adds.

"Does that mean—" I break off.

Abe smiles widely. "Yes, it does. Your parents will be first."

I screech, jump up, and give him and Beatrice hugs. "When?" I ask, still breathless.

"Is tomorrow soon enough for you?" Abe says.

"Tomor—tomorrow! That's too soon!"

Bea smiles at me gently. "No, Floe, it's not."



So the next day, Sunny and I are at the Cryonics Center, waiting to see our parents, hoping the revival goes smoothly. Sunny's told Andrew to come by later, with Jake, but for now, it's just the two of us.

"Can you believe this is happening?" Sunny whispers in the waiting room.

I smile. "It's probably easier for me to believe it than for you."

"It'll be so nice to have them back," she says.

I look at her, surprised. "Really?"

She looks back. "Nice opinion you have of me," she says wryly, then she sighs. "But I guess I deserve that. I haven't been the most ideal daughter—or sister."

I shake my head. "No, I didn't mean . . . This was all harder on you than on us—"

She holds up a hand. "Please, don't even say that. When I think of all you did for me—and after coming back from the dead—"

"Yeah, that's the part that was hard on *you*, not to mention dealing with all those illnesses and deaths and a new family before that."

"Losing you guys *was* really hard," she admits. "But the Tabers were great. They tried their best. They didn't deserve to be treated the way I treated them. And I told them that at your party."

"They were thrilled just to see you," I tell her.

She ignores me. "And stealing Mom and Dad's money the minute I got hold of it was unforgivable."

"Yeah, it was," I say, even though I'm now kind of happy about that little fiasco. My earning the money back totally deflected attention from my crappy end-of-year report card.

She hits me in the arm and grins. "I'm thinking about going back to school," she says.

"Really?" I say. "That's great! For what?"

I Was a Teenage Popsicle

"Art history, I think," she says.

"Really?" I say again. "But you and art—"

"I'm not as good as Mom or Dad or you at making it," she explains, smiling, "but I think I could sell it, or maybe be a curator at one of the big galleries. Or I could open a small private gallery of my own." She shrugs. "You can take the girl out of Venice Beach, but you can't take Venice Beach out of the girl."

"I think you'd be great at that. It's a fabulous idea."

"It wouldn't even have been an option if you hadn't given me all that money . . ."

"Trust me, we made more than we knew what to do with," I say dismissively.

"Andrew's thinking about going back to school, too," she adds.

"Oh, yeah? For what?"

"Accounting or business."

Oh, yeah, I can totally see Andrew kicking it up a notch. Becoming a major, instead of a minor, snake-oil salesman. Not that I think he's evil anymore. Just, well, a salesman.

"Perfect."

"He's not so bad," she says, smiling.

"I know. So you'll have your dream life, after all. A curator and a businessman, living the good life with their perfect offspring in the 'burbs."

"We're actually thinking of moving back to Venice Beach," she says offhandedly.

I stare. "Say what?"

She looks a little embarrassed. "I know it sounds crazy, especially after everything we put you through. But the thing is, we never really fit in in the Valley, and I've missed Venice Beach. I think I had to move to Cactus Hill to become my own person. I had to go through that rebellious thing, even with my parents gone, you know?" She pauses and shrugs. "Well, I did it, and now I'm ready to go back. Like I said, you can take the girl out of Venice Beach—"

"—but you can't take Venice Beach out of the girl." I give her a hug. "I was already thinking about how much I was going to miss being around Jake."

Sunny smiles. "He loves you so much. You'll always be his number one babysitter and aunt."

"And I would have really missed you, too." I mean that. In a way, I feel closer to Sunny now than I do to Emma, or Halley.

She hugs me back. "Ditto."

"I hear the Beach is changing, though."

She shrugs. "Well, we'll just have to do our part to make sure it doesn't, won't we?"

I stare. "Does that mean you'd . . . ?"

"Protest? Sure, why not?"

Before I can process this response, Abe comes into the waiting room, a huge grin on his face. "Floe, Sunny, would you like to come in and say hello to your parents now?"

We exchange glances and grab each other's hands. And smiling, our eyes wet with unshed tears, we cross the threshold, into our new lives.

THE VBCC NEWS, ISSUE #10

"ASK FLOE"

By Floe Ryan, V.B.C.C. Peer Reintegration Counselor

Wow—you flooded my inbox for this issue, guys! But it's great that you're coming to me with all these fantastic questions. I hope my answers are as kickin' as your queries. (Just FYI, I spent *days* thinking about them!) Here we go . . .

Help, Floe! What do you do when a guy you used to babysit for asks you out?!

If he's cute, go. If he's not, don't! Seriously, there's probably no more than about ten years' difference in your ages. I have three words for you: Demi and Ashton.

I'm in big trouble. My old-life boyfriend's married and I can't stop thinking about him!

Ah, young love. The thing is, few high school relationships last forever. Even if you hadn't been cryopreserved, chances are one of you would have moved on and left the other behind to listen to sappy love songs and eat way too much chocolate. (Some things never change.) My advice to you is, take your time to mourn, listen to those god-awful songs, and if chocolate doesn't do the trick, try ice cream. One day, you'll see your old boyfriend again and think, "Man, he is *old*," at which point you'll be ready to ask out some hot young hoverblader.

When you see people from your past who look terrible, what do you say?

The same thing you say when you see people from your present who look terrible—*nothing!*

Flo, you've gotta help me—I have a crush on my holographic teacher!

Okay. Pretend I'm standing right in front of you. Now read my lips. *Holograms are not real!* This teacher you have a crush on *does not exist*. It's not even like a celebrity crush because those people are real, but it's similar in that you're projecting your own ideas about this "person" onto him. Holographic teachers are becoming more sophisticated all the time, and I'm assuming the one that's instructing you has been programmed with a fairly interesting "personality."

I Was a Teenage Popsicle

(You're lucky. The ones I had when I was first thawed were unbelievably boring.) Nothing unseemly can happen with a hologram. But you do have to try to get interested in real people. Are you taking advantage of the tutoring program run out of the Cryonics Center? (My suggestion, as a result of being totally lost in school after I was thawed!) Chances are there's some teenage guy being tutored, too. No? So why not join a club at your school? You just have to get out there. Tough, I know, when you're first thawed, but trust me, eventually, you'll *want* to do stuff other than go to classes and curl up in your bed at home. Good luck!

I'm so embarrassed—I programmed my Skedpet to tell me to buy tampons, and this guy I had a crush on *heard!*

Unfortunately, there's no end to the embarrassing things that can happen to human beings—even the adult kind. If it hadn't been your Skedpet blurting out that you needed to buy tampons, it would have been the hottie catching you with your fly undone or something. Don't sweat it—move on. Having said this, I'll point out that your experience does teach us that perhaps we shouldn't program, er, sensitive information into our Skedpets.

There's a new family pet in our house, and he doesn't like me! Thinks I'm an intruder or something, even though I've been back home for weeks now. Any advice?

He'll come around eventually. I can appreciate how painful it must be to be regarded by a "family member" as a stranger, but he's an

animal; don't underestimate the effectiveness of bribery, i.e. loads of treats. Bound to work wonders.

My parents used to be workaholics, and pretty much left me alone. Now they're retired, and are driving me crazy!

Hmm, this is a sticky one. There are several blogs and websites geared to dealing with newly retired spouses. Granted, your situation's a little different, but the idea's the same. You have to get the 'rents to focus their energies elsewhere. Do they have hobbies? Gardening? Tennis? Urge them to join clubs, do volunteer work, et cetera. You should try to get out of the house as much as you can, too. And I'm not talking about sneaking out late at night with unsavory types. I'm talking about getting involved with your school play and such. Good luck!

What do you do when close friends and family members who know what's happened to you pester you with questions? (Or gawk.)

Walk away.

How do you handle it when someone talks about something that happened during your deep freeze and you don't know what they're talking about?

Despite the highly improved reintegration program here at the center (my input again!), and our kickin' tutoring program, once we're

I Was a Teenage Popsicle

out in the real world, we're bound to become involved in conversations featuring topics we know little, if nothing, about. But hey, loads of people are ignorant about a whole host of things—like current events, for example. How many teens do you know who scan the news every morning? Luckily, we won't have to deal with these kinds of problems much longer. Any day now, our situation will be made public by the Dixons (if they haven't already held their press conference by the time you're reading this), and we'll simply be able to say, "I'm sorry, I was recently thawed. I'm unfamiliar with that issue." Well, okay, we won't sound so geeky and uptight. But you get my drift.

I'm kinda sad about losing my old hockey scar. The girls seemed to like it.

I can totally relate. I was strangely attached to a big freckle on my chin. But it's kind of fitting, don't you think, that we're forced to start our new lives completely fresh, with no scars? With our new experiences will come new scars—inner and outer.

I'd like to help out at the center. What can I do?

Once the Dixons do go public (as I said, any day now), business at the center is going to explode. We'll need dozens of peer counselors. If you have an area of expertise—if you're a whiz with the all-in-one, for example—consider doing a workshop. I'm so happy you want to do something here at the center. The Dixons have done so much for us. In return for giving us back our lives, we should do all we can to

Bev Katz Rosenbaum

help them, don't you think? As a side note, there have been rumors about certain freshly thawed teens intending to go to the tabloids with their stories. I can't express how sickening I find this prospect. The Dixons gave you the gift of life! They will, as I said, be going public soon, so they'll probably beat you to the punch. Which brings me to another way you can help the cryonics cause. It's going to be a whole new world when the Dixons go public. The cryonics issue is bound to be a major factor in upcoming political elections. Get out there and rock the vote! Yeah, I know, you can't vote yourself—you're too young—but you can work for procryonics candidates. And you can urge your friends and family members to vote for procryonics candidates. Not to bring you down or anything, but we're going to need all the help we can get.

But we're strong, right? Over the past few months, I've met so many of you, and I've been astounded, over and over again, by how resilient you all are. Yeah, I know, Abe told me the same thing and I didn't believe him, but it's true. Heck, if I could create a multimillion-dollar business a couple of months after being thawed, who knows what we can all do together! Bring it on, I say. We're ready . . .

