

BEYOND
COOL

Berkley JAM titles by Bev Katz Rosenbaum

**I WAS A TEENAGE POPSICLE
BEYOND COOL**

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*Enjoy & stay cool!
Love*

Bev Katz Rosenbaum

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Summary: Still trying to deal with the social ramifications of having been cryogenically frozen for ten years, sixteen-year-old Floe learns that all the "frozen zombies" are showing signs of weak immune systems, and she sets out to find the one scientist most likely to find a cure.

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For Brian, Andie, and Ricky, as always.

(How did I get so lucky?!)

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The future isn't what it used to be.

—Paul Valéry

[www.venicebeachcryonicscenter/
secretlydefrostedpeopleonly/peer counselorbiographies/
FloerRyan](http://www.venicebeachcryonicscenter/secretlydefrostedpeopleonly/peer counselorbiographies/)

Floer Ryan, Teen Peer Counselor:

Defrosted just last year, cryonically preserved Floer Ryan is living proof that being a “frozen zombie,” as this Venice Beach native calls it, is far from a detriment! No sooner did Floer get herself up to speed on a decade’s worth of inventions, including holographic teachers, Skedpets (holographic scheduling devices), and hoverblades, than she set in motion a massive fund-raising campaign benefiting the Cryonics Center and ensuring her own parents were defrosted.

Floer has had plenty of experience with the social and emotional repercussions of waking up in a whole new world. Her younger sister, now her older sister, was her guardian until her parents were brought back to life! Not only did Floer have to get used to *that*, she also had to live in a new home, in a new city, and make all new friends.

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Floe is thrilled to be in the position to help other teenaged “frozen zombies.” She leads a peer counseling group for teens on Wednesdays at 7:30 P.M. (in the teen lounge), or you can write to her at her totally secure, for-secretly-defrosted-teens-only, online advice column, “Dear Floe.”



Dear Floe:

Help! I thought once I learned how to hoverblade, play smashball, and got caught up in math and science (Can you even believe how many new discoveries there've been?!), everything'd be cool. But I'm starting to think I'll never catch up! My new school friends have grown up with all-in-one computers and virtual reality games. Any advice?

Luv ya,

Slow Girl

Dear Slow Girl:

Sorry. Can't help ya because I'm going through the exact same thing and have absolutely no clue how to deal. Truth is, I'm a total fraud. Bummer, I'm aware.

Luv ya, too,

Floe

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Well, okay, I don't actually write that, but I want to.

I whip my all-in-one into my locker (it's lunch) when my gorgeous boyfriend, Taz, comes up to me and starts to nuzzle my neck. It's okay for Taz to see the advice column I write for other teens who were cryopreserved at the Venice Beach Cryonics Center—my boy toy is a former Popsicle, too—but seeing as Dr. Dixon, head honcho at the Venice Beach Cryonics Center, hasn't gone public yet with the news that there are, in fact, several dozen frozen zombies roaming the earth, I can't very well let anybody else see it. And there are always a whole bunch of people trailing Taz, who's a senior now.

A hugely popular senior.

“Dudes, get a room!”

The comedian who's just caused the nuzzling to stop (grrrr!) is an equally good-looking senior named (nicknamed, I hope) Crimp.

Another senior, Samara, who looks like the reincarnation of Avril Lavigne (before she went all couture), grins and says, “Leave the lovebirds alone.”

Don't be fooled. She's secretly in love with Taz.

Okay, maybe I'm just paranoid.

Taz smiles and turns to Samara, whose locker is next to mine. (Lucky me.) “Hey, want to check out the Holobabes at Bleep tonight?”

Note: the Bleep thing was Crimp's idea; he's buds with the owner. My boyfriend's bff is completely obsessed with the “right” music, the “right” clubs, and the “right” everything else.

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“Abso-friggin’-lutely!”

“Great. Pick you up at eight.”

Okay, you’re thinking, I’m definitely *not* paranoid. And Taz is a jerk. But here’s the thing. Samara is all about music—like Taz—and I’m not old enough to hit the clubs yet. They’re all eighteen, the new, recently lowered drinking age in California. Well, Taz is actually twenty-eight—he was “frozen” for ten years, like me—but his new buds don’t know that. (And in case you’re wondering, yeah, high school’s a year longer now cuz of all the new tech stuff everybody has to learn.)

Taz turns back to me. “So, what’s up with you tonight?”

I muster a smile. “Checkup, then a hoverdriving lesson.” Goody, right? Last year only a couple people on the planet even had hovercars. This year, they’re all the rage. No point even getting your land vehicle license anymore. As if I didn’t have enough trouble learning how to hoverblade. (That’s blading a foot off the ground. The body movements, the timing, the skate levers . . . Don’t even get me started. I could have taken hoverdriving lessons last year, but learning to hoverblade pretty much did me in.)

“Aww, a hoverdriving lesson,” Crimp says. “Isn’t she cute?”

Cute?? Aargh! But I can’t get too mad at Crimp because every so often he says or does something really nice that makes me think there’s another side to him besides the too-cool-for-school one he usually puts out there. Just yesterday, when I was having trouble with my all-in-one, he leaned to-

ward me and whispered, "Those things are too friggin' complicated, if you ask me."

Yeah, I know. People love to impose positive character traits on really good-looking people. I'm probably *so* imagining that other side . . .

"Hey, Apple Martin's playing at Sked," Samara says casually, and I know instantly she'd rather check out Gwyneth and Chris's spawn than the Holobabes. If Taz nixes the idea and she doesn't argue, it's a sure thing she has her eye on him.

Taz wrinkles his nose. "She's okay, but kind of a mainstream pop-tart. The Holobabes are totally original."

Samara nods quickly. "Totally. Just thought I'd mention it."

Great.

"Oh, wow, my locker's, like, a wasteland," Crimp says from his locker across the hall, running a hand through his long, vaguely dreadlocked hair. "I'll never find my math book for class this aft."

"Want some help cleaning it?" I ask. I have no idea why, except that (a) I want Taz to think I'm nicer than Samara, and (b) I really want Taz's friends to like me.

Pathetic, I know.

"Would you?" he says, turning his unbelievably blue eyes on me.

"Sure," I say, forcing myself to sound like there's nothing else I'd rather do. Truth is, I'd rather sit through ten hover-driving lessons than organize the huge pile of crap (whoops, I mean awesomely cool stuff) in Crimp's locker.

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He's at my side in a second and punches me in the arm. "You're a great kid, you know that?"

Ugh, the *kid* thing.

Yeah, I'm definitely imagining that other side.

He drags me over to his locker by the elbow, and I just wave helplessly to Taz.

We spend the next few minutes cleaning his locker. That is, I spend the next fifteen minutes cleaning his locker. While Crimp talks to what seems like every one of the one hundred students at Venice Beach Alternative School.

"Great work, kid!" he says when he finally casts his eye on the newly organized storage space. "Anything I can do for you in return, you just lemme know, 'kay? Fix you up with concert tickets—whatever."

"Thanks," I say, pleased (despite the *kid* thing).

I'm hanging a pukka shell bracelet I found at the bottom of his locker onto a hook when Samara, who's been taking the opportunity to chat up Taz, says, "Awww, Crimp, that's the bracelet I bought you when you came to VBA last year and were accessorizing like a moron!"

It's extremely hard for me to believe the trend-obsessed Crimp ever accessorized like a moron, but I wasn't here last year, and it must be true, because Crimp takes the bracelet off the hook and says, "It's yours, Sammy. In appreciation."

"Awww, you want me to have it?" Samara hugs him and grabs the bracelet out of his hand at the same time.

"S'only right."

Like, he couldn't have given it to *me* in appreciation? (I'm

trying to imagine Samara taking even one minute to help him clean his locker, but the image just isn't coming.)

"So, is this, like, a token of your affection?" Samara teases.

"Yeah, sure," Crimp says vaguely, turning back to his locker to get his lunch, now easily visible on a shelf.

"I'll walk you to the caf," Samara offers.

"Yeah, okay," Crimp says.

When he's not in one of his totally hyper gotta-be-there-and-do-that phases, Crimp spaces out. Which explains how he missed Samara's *très* obvious signals just now. (So who does she like, anyway—Taz or Crimp? My head is spinning.)

As the two of them walk off (wow, it's like I'm not even there), Taz flashes me one of his melt-inducing smiles and says, "And *I'll* walk *you* to the caf."

"*Mucho* thanks again, kid," Crimp calls back. "Lock it, would ya? Later, T-man."

I slam his locker door shut (a little more violently than necessary) and lock it. Taz, still grinning, gestures with his chin toward the cafeteria.

I smile, too, as I start walking, but I'm totally forcing mine. (Are sore cheeks a sign of a relationship gone wrong?)

"So," I say, "fill out your applications yet?"

Being a senior, Taz has to decide pretty quickly where he wants to go for university next year. (Is it bad that he hasn't even discussed his choices with me? That I have absolutely no idea what's going on in that defrosted head of his?)

"Wha—?" he says vaguely, as he always does when I ask

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anything that requires an answer having to do with The Future. “Oh . . . no, not yet. So, listen, I think I’ll just scarf down my sandwich on my way to the locker room. Lunch-hour smashball practice”—smashball being the new and thoroughly repulsive sport involving big smashable balls and heavy bats that everybody except me is into in a major way—“is in five minutes”—natch—“but I’ll catch up with you later, okay?”

“I’ll be at the Cryonics Center before dinner, and hover-driving class after,” I remind him.

“Right. And I’ll be at the club later. But I’ll call you,” he says, giving me a quick (distracted? removed? remote?) peck on the cheek.

It’s not just his future I want to discuss—it’s mine, too. Juniors should have at least some idea of what they want to study, what they want to be.

I don’t.

Possibly because I’m crapping out at school pretty much across the board. Teen peer counselor or not, it’s kinda tough to get back on track when you’ve missed ten years.

2

You'd think I'd have at least a few friends in my own grade, which would partially make up for the horrific treatment I suffer at the hands of my older boyfriend's buds, right?

Wrong.

Hard to believe I kept rhapsodizing about VBA last year when I lived in the boring suburb of Cactus Hill with my younger, now older, sister, till the 'rents were defrosted. I was constantly telling people how much more character VBA had than ultramodern Cactus Hill High (ha—all the wood is rotting, and the place is unbelievably dusty, despite the constant robotic Swiffering), and how there were no cliques at VBA.

No cliques, my foot. Clearly, I was romanticizing my pre-freezer past. There are precisely two cool groups in my

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grade: the goths, who have names like Night and Vamp, and the bladers, with names like Cal and Stevie. If you're not a part of either group, you're in no-man's-land socially. Unfortunately, neither group wants anything to do with me. The goths because they're, well, goths, and the bladers because, while I was a pretty accomplished hoverblader at the end of last year by Cactus Hill standards, I'm a total novice as far as the slavish Venice Beach hoverbladers are concerned. They were a tad friendly with me once they learned I was Taz Taber's girlfriend—until they started seeing how Taz's friends treated me. Then they started laughing at me.

“Hey,” says the one person at VBA who gives me the time of day (aside from a love-struck supernerd named Victor who is continually staring at me). Sophie Bernstein sits next to me in my après-lunch pop culture class (we have all kinds of classes like this—alternative school, remember?), and she's great. Superreal and supersmart. Constantly spewing random smart-girl facts.

“Did you know that scientists are on their way to discovering new chemicals that will make whole body cryopreservation a reality?”

See what I mean?

“You don't say.” I actually do know this. I actually know a lot more than Sophie about this. Said chemicals have, in fact, already been secretly discovered and named (Z30 and F9B). They were added to the liquid nitrogen solution I was preserved in. Completely eliminated the possibility of cell damage.

But I can't tell Sophie this. Dr. Dixon's success at the Cry-

onics Center hasn't been made public yet. Though it's going to be, any day.

She nods, then sighs. "So, do you think we'll actually get an assignment today?"

Poor Sophie. The assignments simply do not come quickly enough. Sometimes she'll just come up with her own project and submit it for bonus points. She must be getting, like, 500 percent in every subject. She's at VBA only because she's way too smart for a regular school—even for a gifted program at a regular school. I swear, that girl's doing Ph.D.-level independent studies. (People other than smart kids who go to alternative schools: free spirits like me, creatives, slackers, and people who walk around talking to themselves. Without Bluetooths.)

"Soph," I say, exasperated, "we just handed in our last assignment." On the sociopolitical significance of three new movie stars whose emergence into the celeb stratosphere I completely missed during my nap in the freezer. "Just because you finished it, on like, the third day—"

"Did you go to all those websites I directed you to?" Sophie demands.

"Yeah. Barely understood a word they were saying"—celebs actually have scholarly articles written about them now—"but yeah, thanks."

"You have *got* to have more confidence in your scholastic abilities," Sophie continues.

Easy for her to say. *She* wasn't packed in ice (well, liquid nitrogen) for ten years.

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I wonder if the freezing (okay, vitrification) process did affect my brain, after all. Dixon says no, but it would be nice if I could have something concrete to blame my new idiocy on.

A few goths wander in, but half the class is still missing. (There's always a ten-minute wait before the start of every VBA class, as VBA students are notoriously allergic to timeliness.) Sophie picks up a *Teen Vogue* our holographic instructor's left on our group table and stares at the cover model. (Pop culture class definitely has its perks!)

"She's beautiful, but she looks almost inhuman," she says, shaking her head.

I grin. Most people visit their plastic surgeons every six months now—it's like dentistry—but in this case, Sophie's way off the mark. "That's Shiloh Jolie-Pitt," I say.

"Who?"

"Her parents were famous movie stars in the early '00s." Clearly, Sophie doesn't remember them. Understandable. These days, celebs are more disposable than ever. The Jolie-Pitts were superstars only a dozen years ago, but it may as well have been a hundred. "They were both gorgeous," I explain. "Shiloh looks like her mom. She comes by those pillow lips naturally."

"Huh." She takes a closer look. "She seems so young."

"She must be about"—I do a mental calculation—"eleven or twelve now." God, I used to think it was terrible when I heard about fourteen-year-old models in the olden days. I pick up a *Seventeen*. "That's Suri Cruise," I say. "She's about the same age as Shiloh."

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“Lemme guess—she’s from another acting dynasty. Hey, I thought you were a rebellious blader type. What’s with all this secret knowledge of old movie stars?”

I wiggle my eyebrows. “I have many deep, dark secrets.” I squelch the guilty feeling I get now and then about not sharing my biggest secret with Sophie, but until the whole successful-cryonics thing is public knowledge, the fewer people who know, the better.

I follow Sophie’s eyes, which have strayed to a goth guy named James, who’s just walked in. (Hooray, a reason to change the subject!)

“Speaking of secrets”—I nudge her—“you like him, don’t you?”

“Sure I like him,” she says airily. “He’s really nice and really smart. You have to look beyond the surface.”

“Hey, I don’t have anything against goths. *They* don’t want anything to do with *me*. But you don’t just like him as a friend . . . you *like* him!” I take a second to check out James. I decide I totally approve. He seems sweeter and more innocent than his pals. He’s always carrying around art supplies, and he once helped me restart my all-in-one when it inexplicably (to me) conked out. And he’s not half bad-looking, though you have to really strain to tell, what with all the facial piercings and the green hair dye.

“So,” I add before she can protest, “are you ever going to talk to him, or are you going to spend the rest of your days mooning over him?”

“Talk to him!” She sounds shocked. “I can’t talk to him!”

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I cross my arms. “Sophie Bernstein, the next Marie Curie, the smartest and most independent female I know, refuses to talk to a guy she likes?”

I’ve got her there. She glares at me, then sighs. She’s about to get up when I stop her. “Wait, he’s headed this way,” I whisper.

Sure enough, James plunks himself down onto a chair at the next table, nodding at Sophie.

Sophie, clearing her throat, blurts out, “So, James, do you wanna hang out sometime?”

I instantly smell disaster. Sophie is that rare creature, an extraordinarily pretty girl who’s so socially maladjusted that nobody even notices her prettiness.

James stares at her. “Sophie, right?”

She laughs nervously. “Right.”

“Sophie, I’m not really into the whole social thing these days. Life’s a little too bleak, you know?”

“Oh . . . right. Definitely.” She nods her head vigorously.

There’s an awkward silence for a few seconds, and then James says, a little more enthusiastically, “But, hey, I need a girl to be the murder victim for my front yard Halloween display. You up for it?”

Sophie stares. “Um, thanks, but I have other plans that night.”

“Oh, right. A party or something?”

“Yeah,” she says.

“Cool. If you’re into that kinda thing.”

Sophie is spared from having to make any more conversation with James when the last few students straggle in,

and the glassy-eyed, caftan-wearing hologram following them floats to the front of the room. I study the hologram intently to avoid Sophie's eyes. (She's back to glaring at me.)

"Good afternoon, class," the hologram's computer-generated voice says. "For the next two months we'll be studying the culturally significant musical personages of the first seven years of this century. You'll present your findings at the end of December, before the winter break. Today, I want you to get into groups of three and come up with subjects. After I record your chosen subject, you're on your own."

I can't believe my luck! This is one project I'm bound to ace! The do-it-yourself method of education—no lessons, no lectures—makes it harder for me to get up to speed on things, but *this* assignment . . . piece of cake!

The goths group together in clusters of three faster than the bladers, and nab Sophie, who looks at me helplessly before being spirited away.

Even Victor's found a group. (Thankfully, he doesn't seem interested in getting to know me, just staring at me.)

Which means I'm stuck with the bladers.

Or rather, they're stuck with me.

I trudge slowly to join the last two bladers in need of a third person. Disgust is written all over their faces.

"Hey," I say brightly, sitting down.

Stevie, another Avril look-alike, exchanges a glance with Cal, a (male) sun-bleached blond in a West Sun unitard. (Life truly does imitate art. Star Trek-style unitards are

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huge now. In Cactus Hill, if you wore anything else, you were practically excommunicated. Luckily for me, in Venice, you can still get away with cool vintage stuff like rock-and-roll T-shirts and cargo pants.)

“So, do you know anything about music back then?” Cal asks, brushing a lock of hair out of his eyes. He’d be cute if he wasn’t such a dolt. The minute he opens his mouth, his cuteness vanishes.

“Yeah, actually, I know a little. There were some pretty cool bands. I—”

“You don’t have to *tell* us what you know,” Stevie says, rolling her eyes.

How did I get here?

“So, I just read Britney Spears’s memoir,” she continues in a bored tone.

“Really?” I respond enthusiastically. “Britney was actually heavily influenced by Madonna, who broke sooo many taboos in the 1980s and ’90s, and was still going strong in the first seven years of this century, even though she was middle-aged—”

“Madonna’s Lourdes’s mother, right?” Cal says. “You guys catch *Biography* with Lourdes last night?” Obviously, Cal only knows about Madonna from the show. Sigh.

“I did,” Stevie says. “She’s the coolest.” Casting a contemptuous glance in my direction, she says, “Her mother’s totally pathetic. Still trying to put out records at her age. It’s just sad.”

“I like her new stuff,” I say defensively. No way am I gonna let these know-nothings diss Madonna.

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God, I sound like *such* an old fogey. Next thing you know, I'll be saying, "Kids today!"

They ignore me, natch. Cal says to Stevie, "Wanna sneak into Bleep to see the Holobabes tonight?"

Looks like everybody's going to be at Bleep tonight except me. *Quel* irony, seeing as *I'm* the twenty-seven-year-old. But I'm not about to show these guys my real ID.

"So," I say, trying to change the subject. "Anybody have an idea for a subject?"

"Let's do this Kevin Federline dude," Stevie says, scrolling down a list of pop music personalities circa the early part of the century she found on her all-in-one.

"I, um, don't think that's a good idea."

They look at me like I'm nuts.

"Have you chosen your subject?" the hologram says, having floated over to our table.

"Yeah," Cal says, glaring at me, "Kevin Federline."

"Duly recorded. You're free to go."

Cal and Stevie grab their things and are gone before I can even finish saying, "Have fun at Bleep tonight . . ."

3

“So, how have you been feeling?” Dr. Dixon asks at my checkup on Wednesday after school. He’s your typical mad scientist/doctor type, complete with crazy, sticking-out white hair. He and his wife, Bea (a female version of him, personality- *and* looks-wise), run the Center together. “Experiencing anything unusual?”

I shrug. “Not particularly. I’ve had a sore throat for a couple of days. Sneezing a lot. Sort of achy.”

“Like you’re catching a cold?” he asks quickly.

I look at him. “That’s not unusual, is it?”

He doesn’t answer. Just says, “Open” and prods my tongue with a wooden stick. Unbelievable. All that technical progress, and they can’t invent a tongue depressor that doesn’t hurt. (Or make any progress whatsoever in the field of feminine products.)

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“This’ll be my third cold in a few months,” I comment when he takes the stick out and shines a light in my ear. “What’s up with that?”

He finishes looking in my ear and then moves back to the counter. “It’s happening to a lot of cryopreserved people.”

Is it my imagination, or does he sound a bit . . . grim?

“Yeah, and . . . ?”

He sighs. “I’ll be honest with you, Floe. It looks to me as if cryopreserved humans are more prone to viruses than the general population.”

Oh. (Uh-oh?)

“Well, colds are pretty harmless, right?”

“It’s not just colds,” he says gently.

Oh (again).

“Still, it’s not like we’re all getting cancer, or dying, or anything,” I say brightly (naively?). “You’re still going to go public, right? The truth will come out one way or another really soon—you’ve thawed too many people.” Much as I hate the thought of going public, having the news come out via the *National Enquirer* would be tons worse than having it released via a press conference at the Center. Can you imagine the crazy articles the tabloids would run? Then, for sure, I’d be treated like a freak—even at VBA, where, lemme tell you, it’s some kinda accomplishment being tagged as a freak, what with all the vampire wannabes packing the joint.

Course, the tabs will go crazy even after a Cryonics Center press conference, but at least the correct information about us will be out there. (Too bad Emma Moder, my pal

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from the first time I was a teenager, won't be around to organize our coming-out party. She's off on a yearlong voyage with the newfound love of her life. I only hope her fill-in will be able to manage the crap that's surely gonna hit the fan.)

Dixon sighs again. "I can't go public until I figure this out." Great.

Dixon tries to smile. "Don't worry. I'm sure we'll get it sorted out in no time."

Now, why don't I believe that?

"Is there anything else you'd like to discuss? Any other problems you're having? Social? Emotional?" His smile widens. "Silly question, right? How could the Center's savior"—I organized a big fund-raising campaign to save the place last year—"and the best peer counselor and advice columnist in the whole world be having any problems?"

Hmmm, how, indeed?

I actually can't run my peer counseling group today because the only two recently "thawed" teens—Lauren and David Silver, a pair of sweet fourteen-year-old twins—are, according to Dr. Dixon, both under the weather and are, in fact, secured in a hospital-type room at the Center. I decide to pop in and visit them before going home.

I stop in my tracks at the door. The curtain separating their beds is pushed back so I can see both of them. They look exhausted, pale, and thin. Lauren has some kind of weird blotchy red rash on her arms, and David's elbows are grotesquely swollen.

Lauren notices me at the door and motions me in wanly.

Bev Katz Rosenbaum

“Hey,” I say softly when I’m at her bedside.

“Hey,” she says. (I can barely hear her.)

“What’s up with being sick? You’ve gotta get better so I have something to do after school on Wednesdays.” Something occurs to me. “Hey, you’re not contagious, are you?”

She attempts a smile. “No. Just . . . rash. Dixon said . . . weak immune system.”

Her words hit me like a thunderbolt. Dixon hadn’t worded the problem that way when I talked to him, and “weak immune system” sounds a whole lot worse than “more prone to viruses.”

What does it mean? That we’re all gonna collapse prematurely? Become old before our time, like Dolly the sheep?

“For now, just the rash . . . and anemia . . .”

“Don’t talk,” I say soothingly. “Sleep.”

Lauren nods and promptly goes to sleep—so promptly, it’s kinda scary.

I move over to David’s bed.

“Hey,” I say.

“Hey,” he says tiredly.

“How are you feeling?” I ask cautiously. I have no idea what’s up with those swollen elbows. But I guess he’s not contagious, either—no nurses tried to stop me on my way in.

“Nice, huh?” he says, attempting to lift an arm.

“What is it?”

“Swollen joints. Another sign of a weak immune system, apparently.” He attempts a smile. “Life as a frozen zombie isn’t hard enough, right?”

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Omigod, my heart just about bursts when he says that. Lauren and David are a couple of the nicest people I've ever met, and they've been trying to make the best of a lousy situation since they were "thawed." They had to go live with an old aunt who clearly didn't expect to have to raise a couple of teenagers at this stage of her life, and, of course, they've had to deal with all the new world stuff, too. The last time I saw them they both told me they found it all pretty scary and overwhelming. And now this.

I don't even know what to say. (Great peer counselor, huh?) But David's soon sleeping, too, so I head back to Dixon's office to get the scoop.

The door's slightly ajar, and I stop mid-knock, shocked to hear Bea talking to Abe in a slightly raised voice. These two are usually so lovey-dovey. Well, as lovey-dovey as a couple of science nerds can be. Most of the time, they're talking about cells.

"Abe, how can we tell him? We can't even find him—he's disappeared off the face of the earth! And even if we did know where he was—and wanted to talk to him—he wouldn't take our phone calls."

Abe lets out a deep sigh. "The one person who can help us get to the bottom of this immune system problem is the person whose heart you broke. What are the chances?"

Wow, a love triangle? For some reason, I have a really hard time imagining that. I mean, Bea's nice and all, but a sex symbol she ain't.

"Abe, Samuel Simkofsky isn't the only virus specialist I worked with at Marshland, you know—"

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Ah, she and Samuel must have been an item when she worked at Marshland, the lung clinic in New York where I died. It was Bea who talked my parents into cryopreserving me, flying my body back to Venice, to Abe's clinic.

"No, but he was the best. Apparently he was just about done with the experiments on some breakthrough treatments for weak immune systems—preventives and cures—when . . ." He sighs. "Well, no point talking about Samuel Simkofsky."

"So lemme get this straight," I say, opening the door and walking in. They both jump about a mile from their chairs. "You have a bunch of thawed frozen zombies—"

"Floe, you're *not* a zombie—"

"—with weak immune systems. And thanks so much for telling me that, by the way. I had to find out from David and Lauren. And you're not even trying to find the one guy who can help us?"

"There isn't only one guy," Abe says tiredly. "There are a number of immunology specialists working here at the Center."

"But he's the best," I say, crossing my arms.

"He *was* the best," Bea says. "Who knows if he's even kept up his work? The doctors with us now are probably way ahead of him."

"I don't see anybody here announcing any breakthrough treatments for weak immune systems. Lauren and David could sure use some of those. Has anyone even *tried* to find this guy?"

"Yes, of course," Bea says. "But clearly, he doesn't want to be found."

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“How hard have you really tried?”

“Not very,” Abe snaps. “Why would we want to find him when he’s tried so hard to disappear? When there are dozens of other doctors working every day to help us?”

“Abe!” Bea admonishes him.

He runs a hand through his hair. “I’m sorry, Floe. It’s just that . . . you don’t understand.”

I don’t understand, all right. I don’t understand why they’re letting pride get in the way of finding the one guy who could solve the immune system problem pronto. (Okay, I do understand why. While the docs are scientific geniuses, they stink at social stuff.)

“This is kind of important, dontcha think?” I say impatiently. “What if the anticryonicists get ahold of this?” There are always anticryonics protesters outside the Center. They’re pretty peaceful, thank goodness—scary only in their self-righteousness—but they don’t even know that Abe’s successfully “thawed” a whole bunch of people. When they find out there are a number of us frozen zombies roaming the earth and that we have damaged immune systems . . .

Abe stares at the ceiling. “Do you think we haven’t thought of that?” He looks back at me. Standing (my cue to leave), he adds, “Floe, I promise you we’re going to solve this problem.”

I make a promise, too—to myself. I promise myself *I’m* going to find Dr. Samuel Simkofsky.

4

I decide I'm going to have to enlist my genius friend's help.

So, how do you tell your best friend you're a frozen zombie? (Answer: Very quickly. Ha-ha.)

Luckily, I have experience. (Had to divulge my situation to a Cactus Hill classmate last year.) I don't imagine Sophie will freak overly much. More likely she'll be thrilled with the whole scientific aspect of it. Not that I'll be able to answer many (any) of her zillions of questions.

I do have the perfect opportunity, though. Sunday night is Halloween. There's a party at Samara's (yippee, right?), where I'm meeting Taz (they're neighbors . . . goody again), and I've asked Sophie to come along for moral support. I decide to dress like a zombie, in torn clothing, with lots of white makeup and fake blood and black rings around my

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eyes, but I add plastic icicles. Frozen zombie, get it? I figure the costume will help her believe me when I tell her about my, er, interesting background. I'm sure I'll find myself alone with her during several points in the evening, while my boyfriend is flirting with our hostess or being dragged away by his A-list-obsessed bud.

"I get it—frozen zombie. Ha-ha," my sister, Sunny, says, coming into the house from the art gallery out back that she runs for our parents with her husband, Andrew. Soon, she'll be heading over to her friend Marissa's house to pick up my adorable toddler nephew, Jake. Marissa runs a day care in her home, and Jake's terrifically happy there. Sunny and Marissa used to be neighbors in Cactus Hill, but both moved to Venice around the same time, Sunny when our parents were thawed, Marissa when she finally left her two-timing husband.

I twirl so the ragged fabric of my skirt floats. "You like?"

"I like," she says, going to the fridge and opening it. (Despite eating a ton—and not even on a veggie diet—my non-preserved, California-girl sister can still pass for a teen.) "You don't think you're taking a bit of a risk?"

"Nah. Nobody knows anything."

"Who are you going to the party with?" she asks. (She knows I'm meeting Taz there.) "You're not walking in alone, are you? Social suicide."

Last year, all these questions and unsolicited pieces of advice from Sunny, formerly my younger sister, would have driven me around the bend. But this year she isn't doing it

to tick me off. She finally “found” herself, and is a much happier person, so she no longer has to torment me—i.e., revel in her new power as an older sister.

“Sophie,” I tell her.

“I like that girl,” she says, shutting the fridge and looking at me again. “No food again,” she adds, sighing.

Our newly thawed ’rents (who died of the same disease I did) still can’t get a handle on virtual shopping or any of the millions of other new daily life things they’ve had to learn. Even before, they always seemed like they belonged in a different time; they’re hippie artist types. But now, the level of their distractedness is ridiculous. My dad’s very impressively managed to avoid dealing with it all, having gone out on the road—in a land vehicle, natch—to purchase inventory for the gallery. Back in the old days, he and Mom used to do all their own stuff, but they haven’t produced much since the big thaw, though Mom spends her days pretending to paint.

“Wanna do a virtual pizza-making thing?” Sunny asks. (Sooo cool: With Wii-like equipment that everybody has now, you can be a chef in a virtual game, have simulated versions of famous foodies guiding you in professional kitchens, and then get the food you “made” delivered to you!)

“Ooh, I’d love to, but I promised Soph we’d do it at her house.”

“Cool. Guess I’ll just have to coerce Andrew into playing with me. It’s no fun doing it alone.”

“You guys hanging around here tonight?” Sunny and An-

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drew live with Jake in the family homestead and take college-level business courses at night.

She sighs. "Yeah, we're skipping class tonight. I think the Halloween costumes might freak Mom out."

"Can't argue there." These days, *Star Wars* fans carry real, working light sabers. (Good thing semi-agoraphobic Mom canceled her checkup this week. When she finds out about the immune system thing, she'll *really* be a basket case.)

"Hey, girls," our mother says, coming in from her studio. "I just realized I didn't prepare any dinner!"

"Hey, Mom," Sunny says, brightening. (I can see the wheels turning in her head.) "Let me show you how the virtual pizza-making game works. I still have some time before I have to pick up Jake."

Mom sighs. "Oh, I don't think so, hon. It just seems so . . . complicated."

So weird. The Center's rehabilitation program has vastly improved since I was thawed, but they can't possibly teach everybody everything, and I guess older people just find it harder to adapt.

Sunny shakes her head. "It's not that complicated, Mom. Floe, sure you don't want to join us?"

"You know what? Maybe I will. I don't have to be at Soph's for another fifteen."

"Great. C'mere, Mom."

We all go into the virtual reality room (one of my mom's few concessions to modern times in our recently purchased but dilapidated—to make Mom feel at home—beach

house), and put on goggles and earphones. Sunny punches in a bunch of numbers on the wall computer, explaining what she's doing to Mom, who pretends to understand.

"Are you sure this is safe?" Mom asks worriedly.

"Of course; everybody does it," I say.

"Floe, you know very well that doesn't mean anything," she admonishes me. "Remember when everybody drove nonelectric vans? Do you remember the smog alerts? The asthma?"

"Yeah, I do." I shake my head. "Sorry. But I just can't imagine there's any real danger in this. It's the same as ordering a pizza. Somebody monitoring your game delivers your order to a local restaurant."

"So, the pizza that comes doesn't have . . . rearranged molecules or anything?"

Sunny laughs. "No, Mom."

Before we know it, we're in the kitchen of Rocco Marconi's famous Los Angeles-based Italian restaurant. It's almost like a lounge with cooking equipment . . . way sleek, done in a red, white, and green color scheme.

I have no idea how these virtual reality games work, how you can really feel like you're somewhere else—somewhere fabulous—when you're not. I've asked Sophie, but the result was a long-winded, science terminology-filled explanation that I couldn't follow at all.

"Can't see a thing," Mom mutters.

"You have to adjust the focus on your goggles," Sunny says patiently, showing her where the focus knob is.

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“It’s still not working,” Mom announces after a few seconds.

“I think I used that one yesterday,” I say. (I’m not even lying. There’s a little gold sticker on the side of hers that none of the others have.) “It was working then.” Methinks Mom’s a bit freaked out.

Sunny and I look at each other. Sunny shakes her head. I nod. Sometimes recently thawed frozen zombies need a little tough love.

“Just do the best you can, Mom,” Sunny says evenly. “We won’t stay long.”

In a flash, Rocco is showing us how to toss pizza dough. (I’ve done this a dozen times by now, and I never get tired of it!)

“That’s great, Mrs. Ryan, just flick your wrist a little more, like this!”

Mom doesn’t answer him.

“Answer him, Mom,” I whisper.

“He’s not real,” she hisses. “I just don’t feel comfortable talking to a hologram!”

“If you don’t respond, the game won’t progress,” Sunny grinds out.

Mom sighs.

“How’s this, Rocco?” she mutters.

“Much better, Mrs. Ryan! Now let’s spread my famous sauce on the dough—made from only the best Roma tomatoes, of course . . .”

He goes on to show us exactly how much cheese to sprin-

kle on. Thankfully, he doesn't talk to Mom anymore. Then it's topping time, and as quickly as it came, the restaurant kitchen disappears. Ten minutes or so later, a delivery guy's at the door. (Love those hovercars—when I'm not learning to drive them, that is.)

At the door, Sunny says, "Floe, you might as well tell Sophie to come over here. We have enough to feed an army. I must've pressed extra large by mistake."

"Okay." Soph just lives a block away, so it doesn't much matter where we leave from.

Mom takes the pizza box from Sunny and says quietly, "I'll set up in the dining room."

When she's gone, I look at Sunny and say, "How worried about her should we be?"

"Not at all. She'll adjust. It'll kill me till she does, but that's life."

"Life after death, anyway."

"Ha-ha. Go phone Sophie. I'm off to get Jake."

I give her a peck on the cheek. "You're a great little-big sister, you know that?"

She smiles. "I so know that."

5

“I swear, I didn’t know he lived on this street,” I exclaim later that night when Sophie accuses me of purposely taking her past James’s house on the way to Samara’s. Turns out he lives, like, five doors away from me. (How was I supposed to know? I’ve only lived here a few months!)

“Quick, let’s go. I don’t want him to see us!”

“Hey, guys.”

Whoops. Too late.

James is made up as a crazed killer. He doesn’t look all that different than he normally does. I guess he didn’t find a victim. There’s a fabric dummy lying on the table. Kinda brings the whole display down.

James seems to realize it. He looks at the dummy, sighs,

and says, "I usually get people crowding around. The dummy's kinda lame, no?"

"No!" Sophie says quickly.

"No," I echo.

He smiles. "Liars." He studies Sophie a minute. She's dressed as a six-year-old, in a pink unitard, pigtails, and drawn-on freckles. "Nice costume."

"Thanks," Sophie says, blushing so hard, even in the dark, I can see her freckled cheeks turn red.

"Hey, you're supposed to be—"

"Tay Taylor," she says. "You play it?"

Hub?

"Who doesn't?" James says.

Um, me?

Sophie turns to me. "It's an interactive comic book."

Ah. Techno-nerd stuff.

"So where's your party? Maybe I should check it out if the host doesn't mind a crasher"—James looks at his display ruefully—"seeing as this isn't working out so well."

Sophie's eyes swivel to mine, panicked, then back at James. "I—thought you weren't . . . socializing these days."

James shrugs. "I tried the loner thing for a while." He gazes forlornly at his "victim." "It's not working out as well as I'd hoped."

"Oh," Sophie says, shooting me a pleading look.

Great galloping nerds. She likes him, and here he is practically inviting himself along to a party as her date, and she's messing up.

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“I’m sure it would be fine,” I tell James. Hey, more friends for me.

“No!” Sophie exclaims. “I’m sure Samara’s parents would be really upset if there were crashers.”

I refrain from reminding her *she’s* a crasher, too.

James looks at her. “You don’t want me to come, do you?”

Sophie, having never dealt with an actual invitation from a member of the opposite sex, is now having some sort of anxiety attack. She keeps starting to speak, then stopping. She’s beet red and is darting her head from side to side, like she’s searching for an escape route or something.

After a minute or so of this, James sighs. “Wow, this whole social interaction thing is heavy, huh? Maybe I *should* do the loner thing awhile longer.” With that, he turns around and heads inside his house.

We both stare after him.

“What just happened there?” I ask Sophie after a minute. “With him, I mean. I know what happened with you—you panicked.”

She glares at me. “Hey, you’re the one with the boyfriend. I’m the geek, remember?”

In only a couple minutes, we’re at Samara’s.

“Hey,” Taz greets us. He’s standing near the door, talking to Samara’s twelve-year-old brother. (That’s my guy! None of the other eighteen-year-olds would be caught dead conversing with Zach.) My ultracool boyfriend’s dressed as Jack Sparrow. *Pirates of the Caribbean 15* just came out. Johnny Depp, unlike almost all of his contemporaries, is as

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popular now as he was a dozen years ago. I suspect he was cryopreserved somewhere along the way. The guy still doesn't have a wrinkle!

"Hey," I say, nearly melting when he plants a kiss on me. Zach, clearly disgusted, takes off. "Great costume."

"You, too," he says, grinning and winking. "Hi, Soph," he says to her, shooting her one of his fabulously sexy smiles. Strangely, she seems immune to its charms.

"Hey, Taz." She looks around. "Originality's in short supply here, dontcha think?"

Omigod, almost all the girls are dressed in pinup-type costumes. How could I have been so stupid as to make myself look hideous? (Not that Taz seems to have noticed. He definitely had love in his eyes when I came in. Clearly, I'm totally imagining that being-distant stuff!)

"Hey, Floe," Samara says, slinking up to us and putting a hand on Taz's shoulder. Sigh. Naturally, she's wearing the skimpiest of all the pinup costumes.

She looks inquiringly at Sophie.

"This is my friend Sophie," I say, instantly realizing that it was a mistake to bring Soph, as her presence is only gonna give Samara more opportunity to monopolize Taz.

But whaddya know, my guy manages to escape Samara's clutches (this time) and lead me and Sophie over to the kitchen. "So, Soph," he says, "haven't seen you in a while. What's going on?"

I ask you, is he not the coolest? (And I don't mean in the frozen zombie sense.)

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Sophie starts babbling on about everything she's learned in the past week or so, and while she's talking, Taz and I exchange glances and smile at each other.

After a while, my gal pal realizes (wonder of wonders!) that she should probably give us some alone time and heads over to the dining room for Halloween-themed snacks. (Pretzel spiders are still huge.)

"So," Taz says, moving closer to me.

"So," I say, hardly able to breathe. (Being near him still makes me crazy!)

"Not only are you the smartest, funniest, and coolest girl here tonight," he murmurs, "you're also the most beautiful."

I start to protest, but he puts a finger to my lips. "Not even debatable." And with those words, he kisses me again.

Can I just say Taz Taber must be the world's best kisser?

When we pull away from each other, he gestures at my costume and grins. "Pretty gutsy."

It takes me a few seconds to respond (recovering from the kiss!). "Well, nobody knows anything," I say finally.

"Always pushin' that envelope," he says. "That's what I love about you. It's great that you went for the crazy, fun costume instead of—" He gestures with his chin into the dining room, where we watch one of Samara's bustier-clad friends flirt with another senior.

"She looks good," I say as charitably as I can.

He rolls his eyes. "Well, yeah—"

Ouch!

“But that was her goal—to look good. You, on the other hand, took the opportunity to be creative and interesting.”

Hmmm. Can I believe he really feels that way?

I tell myself I can.

He smiles. “So, what’s going on in your world? Anything earth-shattering happen to you today?”

I look around before I respond. In a low voice, I ask, “Did Dixon tell you about the virus thing?”

He nods. “Yeah. What do you think?”

Whoops. I realize he probably got the same line I did about being more prone to viruses at his checkup, but chances are he doesn’t realize this means he has a “weak immune system.” I decide not to enlighten him. And for sure I’m not gonna tell him about about my plan to find Simkofsky, cuz he’d totally try to talk me out of it, being the concerned boyfriend he is. (He was right beside me when I saved the Cryonics Center last year and is only too aware of how these missions can take, er, bad turns.)

“It’s probably nothing,” I say finally.

“How’s the hoverdriving going?” he asks, grinning.

I roll my eyes. “*Definitely* don’t want to talk about that.”

“Why don’t you let me take you out for a spin?”

Because I don’t want to do anything that emphasizes the “kid” factor. “You’d be way too much of a distraction.” Changing the subject, I say, “What’s up with you? Any decisions about next year yet?”

Stupid, stupid, stupid, I berate myself. He actually steps away from me.

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“Nope.”

He looks mightily relieved when Crimp comes up to us. After saying a quick, “Hey, kid,” to me, Crimp tells Taz a bunch of them are going to a midnight party at Zur—Oxy’s playing. Is he in?

Taz looks at me for a sec, then says, “Nah, wanna spend some time with my girl.”

“No, Taz, you should go,” I say quickly (instantly regretting my words, natch). “You love Oxy.”

“But we haven’t spent—”

“There’s lots of time till you have to go.”

And there is. But there isn’t. Seeing as Samara keeps coming up to us with what seems to be the sole purpose of caressing Taz. And when *she’s* not around, Crimp keeps dragging him over to a TV to watch what is apparently the season’s most important professional smashball game to date.

Even when it is just the two of us, we run out of things to talk about, as any discussion of The Future is clearly off-limits.

After a while, I tell him, “I think I’d better find Sophie and head home.”

“But it’s so early,” Taz protests.

“She has a curfew,” I lie.

He nods. “Oh. Okay.” He plants another warm kiss on my lips.

Can you say “mixed messages”?

I want to tell him not to go to the club, to stay with me.

“I’ll give you the 411 on Oxy tomorrow,” he says.

Sigh.

I make my smile as bright as I can. "Right. Well, have tons o' fun."

And with that, I drag Sophie away from the snack table.

"But I didn't even get to the mummy muffins yet!"

"We'll make some at your place. Time to go."

"Great costumes," says a robot guy leaning against the kitchen door. "Really original," he adds, looking at my icicles. "What are you supposed to be, exactly?"

"A frozen zombie," I say. "You know, somebody who's been cryonically preserved and brought back to life?"

"Oh, right," he says. "Like somebody from the Venice Beach Cryonics Center over there." He laughs. *Like anybody will ever come out of there! Ha-ha!*

When we're walking home, Sophie says, "I didn't even tell you what a great costume that is. How did you come up with the idea?"

Well, a girl just has to grab an opportunity like that, right?

Taking a breath, I say, "I am one."

"Say what?"

"I am one," I repeat.

"One what?" she says, confused.

I stop. She looks at me, still confused, and I look her straight back in the eye and say, "Sophie, I was a teenage Popsicle."

6

Seated on the computer chair in her stark white room-cum-laboratory, Sophie struggles to take it all in. I've already told her about the immune system thing and how I need her help to find Dr. Simkofsky. (Of whom she's totally aware, natch. Apparently, immunology is her passion. Surprised? I'm so not.) Now, she's asking me a million questions, none of which I can answer. To her satisfaction, anyway.

Finally, she just shakes her head and stares at me. "Amazing."

I shift uncomfortably on her hospital-type daybed. "Sophie, I'm still a person. I'm not a monster," I say, hoping it's true, hoping the immune system problem doesn't make me one.

She comes over and gives me a hug. "Of course you're

not. And of course I'll help you." One of her hands touches my neck on the drawback, and her eyes go wide. "Wow, I never noticed how soft your skin was. Is that the Z30?"

I nod. "It was like having a full-body peel. But listen, how serious do you think this thing is?"

She looks at me thoughtfully. After a few seconds, she says, "I think if we can find Simkofsky, you'll be fine. Don't worry, Floe." She leans over to pat my hand. "We'll find him."

"What do you have in mind, oh, brilliant one?"

Tapping her bottom lip again, she says, "Well . . ." and proceeds to babble on about doing some really sophisticated computer searches, possibly hacking . . .

"Of course," I say.

"Ooh," she says gleefully, "how fun is this gonna be?"

A ton o' fun, obviously.

And while she's yukking it up at her computer, I'm going to be learning how to hoverdrive. So I won't have to depend on Sunny and Taz to drive me places, and so certain dreadlocked popular guys will stop calling me "kid" all the time. (Not that I'm convinced my knowing how to drive is gonna accomplish miracles.)

— — —

"Ryan, concentrate!" Sergeant—I mean, Mr.—Masterson, my holographic hoverdriving teacher, is barking out not ten minutes into class the next night. (They're programming them with, um, distinctive personalities these days.)

His warning comes too late. I lose control and hover-

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crash to the ground. Not that I wouldn't have crashed even if I'd been paying attention. Hoverdriving is *really* hard. Kind of like how driving a land vehicle with standard transmission was in the olden days. Lots of tricky gear maneuvering. And to figure out when to use which gear, you have to read about a million digital dashboard displays showing wind speed and resistance levels and don't ask what else.

And don't even get me started on the nearly impossible-to-see laser beam lane markings once you're in the air. Thank goodness the airways aren't actually that far off the ground—only about ten feet up. (Begging the question, why even *have* hovercars?!) They mimic the land roads, which I'm often forced to peek down at, as the laser beam lane markers in the air are insanely hard to make out.

Luckily, hovercars are practically indestructible—and fully padded. Still, my passengers (it's a group lesson) all start whining about their backs. Crybabies.

“Where's your head today?” Masterson barks again.

“Sorry,” I mutter.

“Five-minute break,” Masterson growls. “Then, to the classroom.”

We always have about fifteen minutes to practice what we learned last week, then we get a short break, and then it's on to classroom work, followed by a new in-car lesson.

Not only am I ignored by the other kids at break, I'm shunned by the robotic coffeemaker, who doesn't even apol-

ogize when she puts cream in my coffee instead of skim milk, just scowls. (Yup, robots can scowl. You'd be amazed at what they can do now.)

In class, Masterson starts droning on about the physics principles involved in hoverdriving, and I start to doze.

"That's it, Ryan, out!"

"Wha—?"

Omigod, is he actually kicking me out of class?

"I'm really sorry, sir. Please let me stay. I *really* have to learn how to hoverdrive."

"No can do, Ms. Ryan."

I draw myself up. "Mr. Masterson, are you or are you not a teacher?"

My question seems to confuse the hologram.

"Of course I'm a teacher," it/he snarls finally. "I'm a holographic teacher."

"Well, teachers are supposed to teach, are they not? Isn't a teacher's proudest moment not when a gifted student 'gets' something, but when a student who has had enormous difficulty grasping a concept finally comprehends it?"

Masterson just glares at me for a bit, then grinds out, "Fine. Stay. But at least try to look alive."

"Fair enough, sir."

More titters.

I try. Honestly, I do.

But let's face it, physics combined with the rules of the sky is a deadly dull combination.

I'm almost looking forward to the in-car lesson by the

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time it rolls around. (Even though we drive on real roads and there's a pretty good chance I'll give some poor, innocent civilian a major fright.)

"Zon, you take the wheel first," Masterson growls.

Not only does Zon (a 250-pound smashball player) easily manage to get into the air, he manages some pretty fancy moves once up there that have Masterson laughing and saying, "Easy, sport."

Zon's buddy (named Tron) does the same.

Then it's time for a dreadlocked girl in a black unitard with a lightning streak running down one side (there's a similar tattoo near her eye), and it seems she, too, has caught on pretty quickly. And she easily handles the new stuff Masterson throws at her—lane changes and such.

After White Lightning comes a guy named Jarnel, who seems like he was born in a hovercar.

And then it's my turn.

I manage to get the car up in the air—for about a second.

It falls with a crash again. (Today we're supposed to be learning how to maneuver the vehicle once we've achieved liftoff, but somehow, I don't think I'll get that far. I always end up using the wrong gear to achieve liftoff and wind up stalling and falling.)

"Jeez, my back!" Zon says. "I gotta stay healthy for smashball. I can't be getting whiplash!"

"Me neither," Tron says belligerently.

Masterson glares at me (for a change). "Care to try that again, Ryan?"

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Kid, Ryan. Why does nobody want to call me by my first name?

I try again and manage to stay up for a little longer this time, but when Masterson shouts, "Left, Ryan, left!" I can't manage it.

I rear end not one, but two other hovercars carrying student groups.

"My back," Zon whines again. Jeez, does he whine this much during smashball games?

"Land immediately, Ryan," Masterson orders me. Which is not a problem at all, as the car is—you guessed it—falling.

"Everybody out," Masterson yells once we're on the ground. "Zon, to the infirmary."

I ask you, should teenagers really be learning something that requires the constant presence of a nurse?

"Ryan, you stay in the vehicle," he barks when everybody starts making their way out.

Um, okay.

"You're gonna learn how to properly achieve liftoff," he says through gritted teeth, "if it kills me."

"Um, sir, you can't die. You're a hologram."

"It's what they programmed me to say in this situation!"

Oh. "Well, it's good that your determined teacher spirit has finally kicked in." I could do without the yelling and the attitude, but at least he's gonna give me some attention.

Sadly, all the attention in the world can't help me. I just can't figure out when to switch gears, and the car keeps stalling out.

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We get to a point where we're just sitting there silently. He rubs his eyes and says tiredly, "Ryan, do you even *want* to learn how to hoverdrive? Maybe you should give it a rest for a while. Are you being pressured into it by your parents? Your friends?"

"No." *Yes. I'm not from this time!* I want to scream. *I shouldn't have to do this at all!* "It was really hard for me to learn how to hoverblade because I grew up with in-line skates," is what I do tell him, finally, "but eventually I learned, and I'll master this, too."

"You grew up with in-line skates?" he asks, puzzled. "How's that? Hoverblades have been around for years."

Whoops. "Long story," I tell him.

"Anyway," he says, "think about what I said. About taking a break."

Easy for him to say. He doesn't have to impress a bunch of A-list eighteen-year-olds.

7

“So, what’s up, Doc?” I crack at my checkup on Wednesday.

Abe doesn’t even roll his eyes at my crack, like he usually does.

“How’s your cough?” he asks.

“I don’t have a cough anymore. That’s good, right?”

“Your weakened immune system is still a concern. We have some immunology specialists working on it.”

But not the best one, I want to say. I don’t. I can’t let Dixon suspect I’m going to try to find Simkofsky.

I (guiltily) decide to skip a visit with David and Lauren, and bump into Taz on my way out of the center. He runs a hand through his hair and says, “Oh, good. I’m glad you’re here. We need to talk.”

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Lightness fills my chest; all is right with the world! How much you wanna bet he's gonna tell me how wrong he was to jump away when I mentioned The Future at Samara's, and how he wishes he'd stayed with me rather than go see Oxy with the gang?

"Sure," I say coolly. (I'll be all over him once he apologizes.) "Wanna go to the caf?"

"Sure."

Once we're seated at a table, he runs a hand through his hair again (sigh—he's looking particularly fetching today, dressed in a vintage tee and cigarette jeans) and says, "So, what's up?"

"Uh, not much."

He looks at me and opens his mouth. Then shuts it.

Then opens it again.

Then shuts it again.

"Taz, is something wrong?"

"No . . . no, nothing's wrong."

"You sure?"

He looks at me, then says quickly, "Here's the thing, Floe. I think we need to take a break."

Say what?

I can't even respond. I just stare.

"It's not fair for me to just get distant," he continues. "I'm confused about the future, and I care about you too much to leave you hanging while I figure stuff out."

No, leave me hanging, I want to scream.

Does he really think it's better to break up with me? Cuz it's totally not. It's totally worse.

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“I really think it’s better this way,” he says.
Guess that answers my question.

— — —

On Thursday, school’s even more of a joy fest than it was before.

The bladers continue to insist on doing our project on Kevin Federline, and Samara openly flirts with Taz (who flirts back—why isn’t he concerned about leaving *her* hanging?). The rhymes-with-please also keeps on flirting with Crimp.

“You need to flirt with somebody, too,” Sophie announces when I start to complain at lunch, like she actually knows something about love and romance.

“Right. Who else is even mildly interested in me? And don’t say Victor.”

Just then, Crimp comes into the caf. When he sees me, he . . . heads over?

“Hey,” he says, sitting down, brushing his dreads out of his eyes. “Wassup?”

“Um, are you lost, Crimp? And wassup with the wassup? Nobody’s said that in years.”

He looks at me and starts to say something, but then he abruptly turns to Sophie. “Crimp. Who are you?”

“I’m, uh, Sophie Bernstein.”

“Do I know you?”

“Apparently not,” I say impatiently. “Sophie’s in my grade, Crimp. She’s my friend. Did you want to ask me something?”

Beyond Cool

“Hey, can’t a guy just be friendly?”

“So, Crimp, do you know anybody Floe could flirt with?”

Good God, the girl is a complete social disaster.

“Sophie!” I feel the heat rising up my face.

Crimp laughs, brushes a stray dread out of his face, and looks back at me. “Yeah,” he says, sobering. “I heard about you and Taz. Bummer.”

I almost fall off my chair. Crimp is sorry about me and Taz? “Yeah, um, thanks.”

He shrugs. “Feel a little responsible. Always dragging him off and such. You’re a nice kid, so I wanna know what I can do for you. The concert ticket offer still holds, BTW. I’m totally connected.”

“You can find her somebody to flirt with,” Sophie repeats.

“News flash,” he says, grinning, “that kinda thing never works. If a guy’s into a girl, he’s into a girl. If he’s not, he’s not.”

“*He’s Just Not That into You*,” I murmur.

“What’s that?” Sophie says.

“Nothing.”

“So you’re saying there isn’t a thing she can do?” Sophie demands.

He looks at me. “Be yourself. Taz is confused about stuff right now, but I think he really is into you. You have to just let him go for a while.”

Wow, Crimp is actually making sense, on top of being nice.

Sophie glances at him with admiration. “That’s seems like very good advice, Crimp.”

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He stands. "Happy to do my bit. Well, kids, gotta run. People to see, places to go." His eyes meet mine. "Take it easy. And remember, if there's anything I can do, lemme know."

I decide to ignore the "kids" thing, since he's being so nice.

Just then, I notice Taz watching our table. He's with Samara. Who has a hand on his shoulder. And is standing a little too close to him.

"Will do. Thanks for caring." I bat my eyelashes at Crimp, who laughs and walks away.

No sooner does Crimp leave than James heads over.

Sophie starts madly batting her eyelashes.

I sure hope I didn't look like that.

"Soph, cool it with the lashes," I whisper.

"But you did it—"

"As a joke! Stop. This. Instant."

She stops. "Hey, James."

"Hey." He shifts uncomfortably. "Thought I should remind you I'm back to doing the loner thing."

"So is talking to me even allowed?" Sophie asks sarcastically.

James looks confused. "Um, yeah, I think so."

Sophie sighs.

"It's not that I don't like you."

"Oh," she says. Now it's her turn to look confused. And I don't blame her. (Does Taz still like *me*? I wonder. Would he still be going out with me if he wasn't so confused about his future? Looking over at him and Samara, I come to the

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hugely depressing conclusion that, despite what Crimp thinks, the answer to that is no.)

“So, anyway, take it easy,” James says, walking off.

We stare after him for a while. Finally, I say, “I really think we should just forget all about guys for a while.”

“I totally agree,” Sophie says. Turning back to me, she says, “Good thing we have our little mission to keep us occupied.”

“You read my mind. So, any progress?”

“I’ve been working on something. Can you come over to my house after school?”

“Abso-friggin’-lutely.” I smile at her.

8

To my surprise, Sophie's asked James to come, too.

I draw Sophie aside on the sidewalk. "What's up?" I ask, gesturing to James.

"It helps me to have someone around to bounce ideas off of."

I refrain from mentioning she has me. "But he can't know—"

"Don't worry, he doesn't. He won't."

"You just want to get him in your bedroom," I tease.

"Floe, quiet!"

At her place, Sophie says brightly, "How 'bout some cookies first? Whipped 'em up in a virtual game with Sarah Lawson"—TV's latest, greatest dessert chef—"just this morning, before school."

"No thanks," James says.

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Clearly, Sophie was not expecting this response. She stands there, speechless.

“None for me, either, Soph,” I say quickly. “Let’s just get right to work.”

“Uh, okay.” Frowning, she leads us upstairs.

“So, James,” she says once we’re in her room (apparently, on the way up the stairs, she decided she wasn’t quite done with her flirting), “this is my room. What do you think?” To my horror, she does the eyelash-fluttering thing again.

James has his back to me, so I frantically do the neck chopping thing in Sophie’s direction, but she ignores me.

Luckily, James doesn’t seem to notice as he checks out her stuff. “Nice. Spare. A little bright, though. My room’s black.”

“I’d like to see it sometime.” Sophie giggles.

Oh. My. God.

But again, James doesn’t even seem to register the hint. “Maybe you will. If we’re project partners or something.”

“Hey,” Sophie plows on determinedly, “I meant to tell you I really like that T-shirt.”

He looks down at his chest, puzzled. There’s a picture of a camera on it. “Thanks.”

“Love the statement it makes about how people live their lives for the camera, how we exist to be watched.”

He shrugs. “I just like cameras. But yeah, I guess it could say that.” He pauses. “Do you like the color blue?”

“Uh, yeah, sure.”

“Really? Huh. I wouldn’t have thought that.”

Sophie takes a moment to think of what to say next (this

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is obviously very hard work; her brows are furrowed, and beads of sweat start to gather on her forehead). Finally she settles on, “Brown is nice.”

This is followed by another awkward pause, then Sophie asking, “Do you prefer hot or cold climates?”

“Uh, I think I’ll take the fifth on that one.”

Sophie stares at him for a second, then sighs and sits on her desk chair. (James and I hit the daybed.) As Soph turns on the computer, I ask brightly (gotta keep her focused and enthused!), “So what’s your plan?”

“Well, I’ve already scoped out some basic information. I have his Social Security number—”

“Omigod, Soph, how did you manage that?”

She shrugs. “Well, I don’t usually like to do it, but I, um, accessed some Marshland files—”

“Wow, you mean you hacked into them?”

“Cracked into ’em, you mean,” James corrects.

“I never crack,” Sophie says vehemently, twisting her head around.

“Whoa, ’splain, people. I’m confused.”

Sophie sighs. “True hackers aren’t into breaking security systems.”

“They’re into discovering and sharing new technologies,” James adds.

Sophie shoots him a surprised look. “Right.” Back to me, she says, “Most of the kids who call themselves hackers are just into doing illegal stuff, and the rest of us call them crackers, not hackers.”

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“But the media calls them hackers, and now, that’s what people think hackers are.”

Wow. Obviously James is into this stuff, too. Who knew that under his goth exterior beat the heart of a techno-geek? (Though I guess that interactive comic book thing was a clue.)

Sophie has a huge smile on her face. Clearly she’s delighted to know her attraction to James wasn’t misplaced. “Frustrating, isn’t it?” she says to him.

He nods vigorously. “Totally.”

“So are you into sci-fi and web design, too?”

“Course.”

Sophie starts reciting some poem about a master and a machine, and James joins in.

When they’re done, Sophie says again, “I never crack, but we need to find this doctor guy fast. Floe here has an unusual medical problem, and he’s the only one who can help.”

He nods again and says seriously, “Then your cracking is totally justified.” He gets up, walks over to the computer, puts a hand on her shoulder, and leans down. “What languages are you into?”

And suddenly, they’re off and running, yammering away about “old” languages like Linux, Python, Unix, Java, and HTML, then about new ones like Nix and Vox, and Menia. I stop listening to the stuff about computer languages, and start watching their body language.

Strange how, when they weren’t talking about computers, they weren’t connecting at all, and now they’re practi-

cally one person; their heads are touching and they're finishing each other's sentences.

I have to say, I'm a little jealous. A relationship is budding right before my eyes. (How is it these weirdos can find soul mates, while normal ole me—well, 'cept for the frozen zombie thing—can't hang on to a guy?)

"Sophie," I interrupt her suddenly, "is anybody else home?"

"No, my parents are still at work."

And she's an only child.

But I definitely heard a noise. A noise that sounded like it was coming from inside the house—from the bottom of the stairs, to be precise. Clearly, Sophie and James were too wrapped up in their boring discussion to notice it.

Plus, James has probably lost half his hearing from listening to overly loud music. And Sophie's actually a little hard of hearing. Wears a hearing aid in one ear.

"It's probably nothing. I just thought I heard something."

And then I hear something else. A noise that sounds like somebody's prowling around upstairs now. In the hallway. Just outside the bedroom door.

"What?" Sophie says impatiently.

"Nothing." I wave my hand dismissively in front of my face. I'm probably just being an idiot.

And then I hear footsteps going down the staircase and the kitchen door slamming.

I run over to Sophie's window and see a guy in jeans—Victor the supernerd?—running away. (Or *is* it Victor? He looks taller. And Victor doesn't seem like the running type.)

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Was somebody actually prowling around in here? Trying to listen to us? If so, why? And was that him?

Who would be following me besides Victor? An anticryonicist who suspects Dixon's been "thawing" us? Nah. They're politically strident, not criminals. They wouldn't resort to stalking—and breaking and entering! Besides, the guy I saw didn't look familiar. I'd recognize any of the regular protesters.

"You're probably just being paranoid, hon. Did the cracking stuff spook you? No worries. We totally know what we're doing. No way we'll get caught." Sophie and James share a sappy smile. Partners in crime. Aw, so cute.

Not.

I sigh. "So, what next?" I tell myself I probably *was* just hearing things. Every one of my elementary school teachers commented on my "active" imagination in report cards. And it's quite possible all this talk about cracking has fed my natural paranoia.

Sophie and James start jabbering on excitedly about what they can do to find Simkofsky's latest address, going on the information Sophie already has, and when they're done, Sophie turns to me and says, "You're gonna stay, right? We can order up a virtual pizza for dinner."

"Sorry," I say. I'm already at her bedroom door. "Hover-driving lesson."

Which, for the first time, I'm almost happy about. Anything but watch Sophie and James flirting. Makes me lonely for Taz, who at this moment is probably flirting with Samara.

9

So here I am the next day, no further along re: finding Simkofsky than I was before, and sans boyfriend.

And a clear view of Samara draping her hands all over Taz, who's smiling.

Grrr.

I march up to Crimp's locker and say, "I need a favor."

He grins. "Cashing in, huh? Whaddya have in mind?"

"First, I assume everybody's going to Bleep tonight?"

Blik, a hot new singer, is on the bill.

"You know it."

"Good. I hear you're buds with the owner."

He nods. "You heard right."

"I need to get in tonight—with a friend."

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“Could’ve done that for you ages ago. Thought you weren’t interested.”

“Yeah, well, I’ve changed my mind.”

“Tell the guy at the door you know me,” he says as he shuts his locker and walks away. “I’ll have him look out for ya.”

“Thanks. You gonna be there? In case they wanna check with you?”

But he’s already got his arm around one of his bazillions of groupies and is halfway down the hall.

— — —

I manage to talk a new and cute sophomore named Trey into coming with me to Bleep. The popular girls in his own grade haven’t discovered him yet. (Soon they will, and then I’ll be persona non grata with him, too.)

Crimp makes good on his promise, and the bouncer lets us into Bleep when we get there.

It’s an amazing place—manages to combine the best of the old-time, intimate clubs with modern edginess. It’s totally overtaken the big-box chain, Caf A, that was threatening beach domination last year.

Once inside, Trey drapes his arm around me casually, and I snuggle up to him when Taz and Samara walk by.

Taz looks shocked.

“You’re—here,” Samara sputters.

I just smile.

Soon we’re seated—next to Samara and Taz.

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Can you say awkward?

Luckily, Blik comes out, and Samara is kept very busy between screaming out lyrics, trying to get Taz to kiss her, and shooting prolonged looks at (an oblivious) Crimp, who's holding court at the bar.

My evil plan is definitely working. To Samara's obvious chagrin, Taz is checking me out, big-time. Possibly because I'm wearing a bikini top (over a tank) with a denim mini and fishnets. (Can you say attention-getting?) Unfortunately, I'm finding it impossible to act all cool cuz Taz is in his lowest-riding pair of skinny black jeans and his tightest black T-shirt, the one that shows off his lean, muscular physique to perfection.

This nonsense goes on for about an hour. When Blik finally takes a break, Samara says something to Taz, and they get up quickly. Taz nods to me and follows Samara out of the club.

"So," says Trey (whoops, sort of forgot about him), "come here often?"

I nearly spit up my soda. Does he even realize he's just uttered an ancient pickup line?

I doubt it, I decide as I study him. He's way too young. And he's trying way too hard to look like he belongs.

I attempt a smile. One thing hadn't occurred to me when I'd devised my master plan: that I'd actually have to make conversation with Trey.

Maybe it won't be all that difficult. He's young, but he's sweet. Who knows? Maybe I really will end up liking him.

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Maybe I'll even go out with him again, if he asks. Why not? Taz broke up with me, right? I'm a free woman. I can go out with whomever I choose. Even cute sophomores. We're not that far apart, age-wise, just a year. Maybe he'll even become my boyfriend! Maybe we'll stay together forever! Maybe we'll get married—

Okay, maybe not. But who says I can't have a fun night out with the guy?

"Nope," I answer him finally. "Never been before." I explain that I'm still underage, and the only reason we got in is because of Crimp. "So, what do you think of VBA?" I ask him.

He shrugs. "It's pretty good, so far."

"What do you like about it?" I continue encouragingly, attempting to keep the conversation flowing. Maybe he's just shy with older women. Though he's obviously not averse to dating them.

"The smashball team rocks," he says.

With those words, I know I'm in for a long night.

But I don't give up.

"We also have some other great stuff going on, like—"

"Yeah, I know. There's tons of activities. But the smashball team, man, it's good! Coach Rolfsson—"

And he's off and running.

And I'm off and half dozing.

I only perk up again when I feel his hand over mine on the table and hear him say, "I really like you—you're a great listener."

Uh-oh. Why did I not foresee this possibility? Trey is looking at me in a way I definitely don't want him to look at me. (Forget all that fantasizing I was doing before.)

Could be he's looking at me that way, I realize too late, because he's completely smashed. While I've been downing sodas, it seems my pretty young boy toy has been getting (illegally) sloshed. (Good thing we walked here.)

Unfortunately, he's not sloshed enough to pass out.

Okay, I don't really want him to pass out. Just to get drunk enough to enter the navel-contemplation stage and be quiet.

Nope, no quiet happening here anytime soon. He's off again, babbling on in vivid detail about all the girlfriends he had at his old school and how none of them could ever seem to just shut up and listen to him.

I decide honesty is the best policy. "I'm actually a terrible listener. I'm really just tired." Well, okay, this isn't quite the truth. I'm really just bored, but a girl can't always be *perfectly* honest.

This throws Trey for a moment, but only for a moment. He's a smashball player who, in his one short month at VBA, has taken Coach Rolfsson's drills in the art of persistence to heart.

"I think I could learn a lot from you," he murmurs.

Is he thinking what I think he's thinking? If he is . . . ewwww!

I yank my hand away. "Trust me, there's nothing you could learn from me."

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His eyes glint. "I think there is."

"Trey, I'm really not the girl you thought I was."

"You're not a girl . . . you're a woman." Then—swear to God—he *growls*.

Double ewwww.

"You know, Trey, I'm thinking maybe we got off on the complete wrong foot—"

"You're right. We definitely should have gone somewhere more private . . ."

I start in quickly again so he won't growl a second time.

"No, I mean, what I feel for you is, well—"

"Complicated," he says, nodding. "I know."

"No, it's not complicated. Not at all."

He grins slyly. "So it *is* lust for you, too, huh? I knew it!"

"No, that's not what I meant!"

He gets up and starts to move to my side of the table. I'm sitting on a bench against the wall. I look for Crimp at the bar, but he's gone.

There's no way I'm about to let Trey cuddle up to me on the bench and breathe disgusting beer breath all over me— or plant wet, slobbery, kisses on me.

I stick my foot out and he goes sprawling.

Luckily, I catch a glimpse of Crimp exiting the bathroom, and, when I signal him, he ambles over, whistles, and says, "Impressive."

"I'm outta here. Give him some coffee when he gets up. He's not unconscious or anything. He's moaning."

"Will do. So, didja like him?"

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“What?” I say, confused. Obviously, I didn’t like Trey much. I incapacitated him.

“The singer. Blik.”

“Oh—no, not especially,” I admit.

“Me neither. I tend to like music from the turn of the century—you know, Green Day and All-American Rejects.”

“You’re kidding—I love Green Day!”

He grins. “Well, that’ll be our little secret.”

“Hey, I’ve been meaning to ask you, what school did you go to before you came to VBA last year?”

He doesn’t hear me. The music’s started up again, and it’s way loud. And then a bunch of girls are all over him.

And it’s definitely time for me to go home.

10

Inventory time:

- a. *I'm unpopular (evidence: one friend).*
- b. *I'm untalented (evidence: I suck at hoverblading next to the Venice kids—don't even bother doing it anymore—and I was never much good at anything else).*
- c. *I'm stupid (evidence: doing lousy in school, need Sophie's help to find Simkofsky).*
- d. *I'm a terrible peer counselor (evidence: have no idea how to talk to/help Lauren and David).*

I decide a late-night phone call to Halley Rogers, my good friend from Cactus Hill High, will make me feel better
It so doesn't. She just yammers on about her boyfriend,

Kalel, and their trip to Wallyworld (yeah, the mart's still going strong) to buy Valentine's Day gifts for each other.

Finally, she asks how things are going at VBA.

"Oh, everything's fabu," I lie.

"Really?" she asks suspiciously. "I can tell from your voice that something's up."

"Nothing's up," I say.

"Hey, I know you, remember? Listen, I'm sorry if I was a total bore just now. Didn't mean to bend your ear about Kalel this whole call—"

"No worries," I say lightly.

"How's Taz?" she asks.

The fact that Halley and I are no longer close really hits home with that question. The thing is, she has no idea what's going on in my life now. And it takes way too much energy to catch her up on everything over the phone. (We never see each other in person anymore. It's hard to get from Venice to Cactus Hill unless you drive. Add that to the fact that we go to different schools, and, well, need I say more?)

I still love Halley. I'll always love Halley. If it wasn't for her, I would have died last year. (Well, not really, I'm exaggerating, but you know what I mean.)

"We, um, broke up," I say.

"No!"

"'Fraid so."

"Wow, that's awful, Floe. Okay, I feel doubly witchy now for spewing all that Kalel stuff out before."

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“Halley, it’s okay—”

“No, it’s not! Is there anything I can do?”

“No,” I say, realizing it’s true.

“But—why? What did he tell you?”

“Future stuff. He’s college-bound, blah, blah, blah . . .”
Well, that’s not exactly right, but like I said, it’s hard to get all the details right on the phone.

Halley murmurs something semicomforting, and suddenly my eyes well up. I don’t want to crack up over the phone, so I quickly sign off after thanking her for listening.

— — —

The next morning I decide spending quality time with family members (as opposed to hormonal adolescents) is what the doctor ordered (well, that and an immune system strengthener).

Sunny’s only too delighted to hand Jake over to me while she gets breakfast ready.

“Book, Jakey?” We’re in the den, where all his books are, and I start reading him my fave, about a robot named Robbie.

“No book!” he yells, taking it out of my hands and whipping it at the bookshelf.

Wow, when did my sweet baby nephew acquire the ’tude?

“Hey, Jake, no throwing—”

Now he’s throwing toys (only soft ones, thank goodness).

Huh, he’s really not a baby anymore.

Whoa, now he’s throwing harder toys.

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Well, at least he's taking my mind off of my own problems . . .

— — —

I could try to get closer to my mother.

Then again, maybe not.

Mom, having been told about the immune system thing (she couldn't put off that checkup forever), now constantly asks me how I'm feeling. On top of being completely overwhelmed by all the new technology, she is also now totally obsessed with my health.

After dinner on Saturday night (woohoo, hot Saturday night at home with Mom), I let her in on my plan to find Simkofsky, thinking it will put her mind at ease, but it has the exact opposite effect.

Now she's worried about my safety, in addition to my health.

"Mom, how is it unsafe?" I say, exasperated. "We find his address, and we contact him." I refrain from telling her I'm planning to contact him in person and also that I still have the crazy feeling I'm being shadowed. (By whom, I have no idea. I remain convinced Victor isn't up for anything beyond staring.) "We ask him if he wants to help, and either he does or he doesn't. It's worth a try, don't you think?"

Chewing her lip, Mom says, "Honey, if the Dixons thought he could help, I'm sure they would have contacted him. And there are other immunologists working on the

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problem. This Dr. Simkofsky sounds like a bit of a nut. What if he becomes angry when he's found?"

"That's not going to happen, Mom." At least, I hope it's not going to happen. I've actually never considered that possibility. "He was involved in this big love triangle with Abe and Bea and took off cuz his heart was broken." It's still hard for me to imagine Abe and Bea in a love triangle, and I have to shake off the disgustingly graphic mental image that comes to mind whenever I do consider it.

"And is Sophie planning to hack into websites to find out where he is?" Mom asks, frowning. "Because that's illegal, you know."

"She's not going to hack into any websites, Mom." She's going to *crack* into some websites, which is a different thing entirely.

Mom sighs. "I'm just worried about you, sweetie."

I sigh inwardly. What's really a bummer about being a thawed frozen zombie is that it gives Mom all these *extra* reasons to worry about me. Other parents of teens have to worry about the old standbys, sex and drugs and rock and roll; mine have to worry about all that (okay, not really) plus weak immune systems, anticryonicists, and possibly dangerous searches for crazy doctors.

On the one hand, Mom's justified in being a little over-protective; on the other, like all those other parents, she has to just accept that mommies can't protect their little girls forever.

"Mom, I'm twenty-seven!"

Okay, that probably wasn't the smartest comeback under the circumstances, because even though I was born twenty-seven years ago, I was frozen for ten of them. Physically and emotionally, I'm still only seventeen, and insisting I'm twenty-seven probably just makes me seem immature.

"No, honey, physically and emotionally, you're only seventeen," Mom says. (Told ya.)

"Okay, I'm seventeen. Which means it's time to let go a little, Mom."

She sighs. "Oh, honey, I wouldn't have any problem letting go if—"

"Oh, really?" I cross my arms and smile.

She smiles back. "Okay, well maybe I still would. But you have to admit, I was a lot more easygoing in the days before—well, you know."

It's true, she was. All my friends' parents, also being artists and such, were pretty cool. But my mom was the coolest.

I feel a little twinge of—sorrow, I guess—for the loss of that carefree life.

Can't think about that now.

"Honey, I know something's happened with you and Taz"—I start to say something but she holds up a hand—"and I just can't stand watching you walk around heartbroken. Lord knows that stuff's hard enough to deal with, and now you have to cope with all these medical problems on top of that . . ."

I give her a hug. "Mom, seventeen is just about the per-

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fect age to get your heart broken,” I say, trying to keep things light. “As for the other stuff, really, there’s nothing to worry about. We’ll find Simkofsky, he’ll agree to help us, and everything will be fine, you’ll see.”

“Honey, it’s good that you’re staying positive, but I don’t think you should deny that you’re experiencing some pretty serious health problems or that you’ll be facing enormous risks if you go ahead with your plan. Do you think maybe you’re in denial?”

I roll my eyes. I guess it’s good that she’s back to sounding more like my hippie mom of old, what with her talk of denial and all. But she’s really off the mark there.

I’m so not in denial.

Am I?



Maybe I am, insisting that Sophie aid and abet my craziness. I decide to ask her, in Pop Culture the following Tuesday morning, if she's made any progress, there having been a days-long silence on the topic.

She shakes her head mutely. It's not a talk-to-me-about-this-later shake, it's an I'm-stupid-and-I-hate-myself-and-I-don't-want-to-talk-about-it shake.

She looks exhausted. From, I think guiltily, staying up nights trying to figure out how the heck to help me, after having hit several brick walls. And wondering how to deal with James, who's back to giving her mixed signals.

"Hey, Soph." It's guess who, looming over Sophie's desk. (We're still waiting for the rest of the goths and bladers to come in.) "How's it going?"

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“You know how it’s going,” she says tiredly.

He nods sympathetically. “Yeah. But I have some great new ideas.”

She brightens. “Awesome. Wanna come over after school and we’ll work on them?”

“What day is today?”

These are my people now. Computer geniuses who don’t know what day it is.

“Um, it’s Tuesday.”

“Is it? Cool, I like Tuesdays. But I *love* Wednesdays!”

“So do I,” Sophie says.

“You do? How come?”

Uh-oh. She wasn’t expecting to be asked. “Um, because they’re in the middle of the week?”

He nods. “Exactly. Halfway to the weekend, right?”

She nods back, relieved. “Right.”

“But there’s something to be said for Thursdays, too.”

“That much closer to the weekend,” Sophie chirps happily.

He gives her a puzzled look. “No.”

I was totally right: clearly these two techno-brainiacs have to be near a computer in order to connect. Talk about painful conversations.

“Oh—well, why do you like Thursdays then?”

“Fish and chips in the caf, of course!”

“Ah . . . of course.”

Awkward pause.

“But like you said, Tuesdays are good, too,” Sophie offers. “I really like Tuesdays.”

Yikes. If it were me, I totally would have gotten off the whole day-of-the-week thing.

“Oh? Why’s that?” James seems very intrigued.

“Because, um, Mondays are the worst days—”

“Day after the weekend and all that,” James says.

“Right! And on Tuesday, that whole yucky going-back-to-school feeling is behind you. It’s gone. It’s done. *Sayonora!*” I’m hoping she’ll stop with all the “gone” words, but there are still plenty in her arsenal. “*Buh-bye. Ciao—*”

“Right,” I say. “So we’ve clearly established that pretty much all the days of the week have their merits.”

“Well, not all,” James clarifies. “And, hey, Floe, you haven’t told us what *your* favorite day is.”

“Yeah, what’s yours, Floe?” Sophie asks, delighted to have the attention focused on me for a moment.

“I like Saturdays.”

“Well, who doesn’t?” James says.

None of us have anything to say to that.

Finally deciding a change of subject is in order, Sophie turns to James. “So after school today is good?”

“Sorry, can’t today. Plans.”

“Oh? What kind of plans?”

“Well, there’s this girl, *Evanescence*, and she asked me to check out *Kumsama’s* latest vampire flick at the Paramount at four.”

“You’re . . . going to a movie with . . . a girl?”

Uh-oh.

“Uh, yeah.”

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“So it’s like . . . a date?”

He frowns. “No . . . yeah. Maybe. Don’t think so. Not sure.”

“But I thought—” Sophie sighs. “Never mind.”

“Hey, do you like Ian Magna’s books?”

“Yeah. Why?”

He nods and winks. “Thought so.”

She crosses her arms. “Why’d you just wink at me?”

He looks at her. “Uh, I dunno.”

She shuts her eyes.

“What’s wrong?” James asks, concerned.

“Nothing. I’m just a little . . . confused.”

He nods. “Right. About what to do next to find that guy.”

She gives a short laugh.

“Well, maybe I can come over after the movie, and we can try some other stuff.”

She waves a hand. “Yeah, okay, whatever.”

Yikes. Sarcasm is definitely bad for project morale. “That’s great, James,” I say, turning my voice brightener to eleven. “I know you want to do everything you can to help Sophie.” I look pointedly at Sophie to make sure she registers that point.

“Yeah, right,” she mutters.

More sarcasm. Peachy.

— — —

Of course, things only get worse when Cal and Stevie come in and we group together to work on our Kevin Federline

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project. (Hafta say, I never thought I'd be putting those three words, *Kevin*, *Federline*, and *project*, together.)

In an attempt to demonstrate that Kevin Federline was a joke, I find the 2007 Super Bowl commercial that had him playing a wannabe rapper working in a fast-food joint on YouTube.

"But that only proves how culturally significant he was," Stevie says. "Only really big stars do Super Bowl commercials."

"Oh, wow," Cal says, peering at his all-in-one. "Says here he was married to that Britney chick. That ices it—he's definitely culturally significant."

"But," I plead, "someone who's culturally significant is someone who had an impact on the mass population—somebody who influenced fashion, for example. K-Fed was totally derivative."

"Der—what?" Both Cal and Stevie stare at me blankly.

I sigh. Given the fact that I'm a frozen zombie with *much* more important things to worry about—like whether I'm going to live for any significant length of time—I decide to just shut up about K-Fed.

Cal and Stevie spend the rest of the class analyzing the depth of K-Fed's lyrics.

I doodle a picture of Taz.

And breathe a big sigh of relief when the bell rings.

12

As I'm kinda spearheading the whole finding-Simkofsky effort, I know I have to show up at Sophie's house after school, but seeing as James is taking in a movie first, I decide a virtual hoverdriving lesson at home is in order before heading over to my confused friend's house. Can't hurt, right?

So I go into the virtual game room, and soon I'm on a virtual hoverdriving practice track.

"Hello, student," a soothing robotic voice says. "Welcome to the hoverdriving track. Please tell me if you are at a beginner, medium, or advanced level in your hoverdriving career."

I ponder that for a moment. I have had *some* hoverdriving experience . . .

"Medium," I say.

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“Medium,” the voice repeats. “And what is your name, student?”

“Floe Ryan.”

“Floe Ryan, would you like a lesson today, or would you like to race other hoverdrivers?”

“I would like a lesson, please.” You have to answer these dudes in full, clear sentences or you could end up in (virtual) Timbuktu.

“A lesson it is, Floe Ryan. What color hovercar would you like to drive?”

“Blue.” Like my mood.

A blue hovercar appears in the misty air beside me. They *are* awfully cute.

Ha, right. Cute like those little monsters in the *Star Wars* movies that look like sweet little babies until they bare their teeth.

“Please climb into your hovercar, Floe Ryan,” Roboto commands me. “And please remember to buckle your safety strap. Say, ‘I am ready,’ when you are ready.”

“I am ready,” I say a second later.

“Very good, Floe Ryan. Please start your motor and accelerate in order to gather enough speed for liftoff.”

I obediently start my motor, but the acceleration thing gives me pause. Hmmm. Clearly Roboto doesn’t think someone at a medium level needs to be reminded how to accelerate.

And yet I do. (You need to start doing some of that dashboard reading and gear stuff at this point.)

“Please accelerate your vehicle, Floe Ryan,” Roboto says

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again a second later. “If your vehicle is not accelerating, please say, ‘My motor is not accelerating.’”

“Well, it isn’t that it’s not accelerating, exactly,” I explain as loudly and clearly as I can, hoping Roboto will understand and not boot me halfway across the virtual planet, “it’s just that I, um, forget how to accelerate.”

There is a long pause, and then Roboto says, “You forget how to accelerate your vehicle, is that right, Floe Ryan? If this is correct, say, ‘This is correct.’ ”

“This is correct,” I say, relieved.

“Clearly, you are not a hoverdriver of medium ability,” Roboto says.

Wha—? Is he giving me *tone*? Nah. Can’t be. He’s just a computer chip. Clearly, my low self-esteem is getting the best of me. At least, I hope that’s all it is. He’d better not be dissing me. I certainly don’t need cyber-humiliation when I get so much of the real thing.

“If you would like to change your level to beginner, say, ‘I would like to change my level to beginner.’ ”

“I would like to change my level to beginner,” I respond, gritting my teeth.

“Fine.” OMG, Roboto definitely sounds pissed. I can’t believe it!

Well, tough, dude. Ain’t no cyber-man gonna intimidate me into leaving the track.

Roboto launches into an excruciatingly detailed explanation of what all the gears do (oh, man, just tell me what I need to know!) and when I realize he’s practically shouting

at me to accelerate, I also realize I must have nodded off for a couple of minutes. This is probably, like, the sixth time he's told me to accelerate.

"Sorry," I yelp.

"Do you need me to repeat the instructions, Floe Ryan?" Roboto asks.

Holy crap, he really *is* giving me tone! "If you need me to repeat the instructions, please say, 'Repeat instructions.' "

"No, I don't need you to repeat the instructions!" I yell. I do, but I'm not about to tell him that.

"No need to shout, Floe Ryan. Please keep your voice down, so as not to disturb the other hoverdrivers."

Oh, Lord.

Somehow I manage to get the hovercar moving—a bit. Then it stops. Which is Roboto's cue to launch into another unbelievably long-winded explanation of how to gather the speed the vehicle needs to lift off.

After a few more times, I finally manage to get up a respectable level of speed, but I also manage to crash into another hovercar that appears out of nowhere in my game room.

"Please stop your hovercar at once, Floe Ryan," Roboto screeches at me.

"It's already stopped," I grind out. "I crashed."

Of course, once I'm ready to go again, I have to listen to the whole how-to-gather-speed speech again.

I will myself to get it right on the first try.

I do it!

And then it's liftoff time.

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Honestly, it's beyond me how kids my age can do this.

It's beyond me how *adults* can do this. Far as I'm concerned, nobody without an aeronautical engineering degree should be driving hovercars.

Needless to say, I don't achieve liftoff.

"You have not achieved liftoff, Floe Ryan," Roboto informs me, sounding like an angry, disappointed dad.

"No guff," I mutter.

"If you have something to say, you must speak loudly and clearly, Floe Ryan."

There is just no end to the disappointment I'm causing Roboto.

So I have to do the whole accelerating thing again before trying to achieve liftoff again.

This time I actually succeed!

And crash into another hovercar.

"Please lower your car to the ground and engage full stop procedures immediately," Roboto shouts in an urgent tone. (Jeez, does he have to be so dramatic? It's a freakin' virtual game.)

And lowering the car to the ground is considerably easier said than done.

"Um, how do I lower the freakin' car to the ground?" Like, does he think he doesn't have to tell a *beginner*?

"Foul language is forbidden at the virtual hoverdriving track, Floe Ryan," Roboto says sternly. "We have a three strikes policy. You have one strike."

"How do I lower the friggin' car?" I scream.

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Roboto lectures me about foul language again (even though I've been using squeaky clean versions of swear words), then launches into a snooze-inducing lecture re: how to lower the car, and after a few tries, I finally manage to get it back on the ground.

"It's about freakin' time," I mumble, exhausted.

"Floer Ryan, that is your third strike. I must ask you to leave the virtual hoverdriving track."

He sounds thrilled.

"Trust me, Roboto, I'm more than happy to. *More* than happy to."

B

“Can you believe that guy?” Sophie fumes.

James hasn’t arrived yet.

I pretend not to know what she’s talking about. “What?” I ask innocently, “you think he doesn’t really have any ideas?”

She bites into a sixth chocolate chip cookie. After swallowing, she says darkly, “You know exactly what I’m talking about. Was he or was he not giving off relationship vibes last time?”

“Well, maybe a little bit,” I admit, “but he did tell you he was doing the loner thing—”

“I thought he’d changed his mind!” she cries, grabbing another cookie. “And he’s not alone *now!* He’s at a movie! With some *goth* girl! God, why does it all have to be so *complicated!*”

“Maybe it’s not that complicated,” I hear myself saying. “Maybe we make these things more complicated than they have to be by labeling everything. If he’s not my boyfriend, then what is he—you know?”

Wow, I impress even myself with that quickly improvised bit of wisdom!

I hear a noise. “Did you hear that?”

“Oh, Lord, not this again. Would you just relax?”

“Hey, watch the tone, Bernstein!”

“God, sorry.” Sophie sighs and runs a hand through her hair. “Everything—the search, James—has made me crazy. I’m sorry if I’m being a rhymes-with-witch.”

“No prob. I’m sorry if I’m being a wuss. It’s just that lately I’ve been getting the feeling I’m being . . . followed.” Like on the way here, for example. Thought I caught a glimpse of that taller-than-Victor guy on my way over.

Could Victor be wearing lifts and following me?

Nah, on the rare occasion I’ve talked to him (to get his help with schoolwork, usually), he actually looked me in the eye and didn’t even stammer when he talked. He’s definitely not a psycho stalker type. Yeah, sometimes I catch him looking at me, but I’m guilty of staring at people I find attractive, too. Anyway, this guy was a *lot* taller than Victor—too tall for lifts to have been the source of the extra height.

But if it isn’t Victor, who is it? The anticryonics protesters who hang outside the Center don’t even verbally harass

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us. (Although they might if they knew we were frozen zombies. They just think we have relatives in suspension.) Frankly, they all look too tired (from juggling protesting with full-time jobs and family responsibilities) to do anything that requires more than sign-holding. And like I said, I've never seen this guy outside the Center. I pretty much know what all the regulars look like.

Sophie rolls her eyes. "Don't be ridiculous, Floe. Nobody follows people anymore. Do you have any idea how easy it is to track somebody electronically?"

"Actually, no."

"Well, trust me, it's a cinch."

"Well, okay, but somebody who's tracking you ultimately wants to *find* you to *do* something to you, right? Like, a stalker, for instance, *wants* to get close to you."

Sophie seems a tad flummoxed by this. Now we're talking about human interaction, and that, as you know, isn't her strong point.

"Just trust me," she says finally.

Sigh. "Okay. Whatever." Once again, I tell myself I've been totally imagining the whole thing.

Changing the subject, Sophie says, "So back to the whole guy-girl deal. Frankly, I'm finding it a big drag."

"Tell me about it," I say drily.

"What's going on with you and Taz, anyway?"

"Whaddya think's going on? Nothing. He broke up with me, remember?"

She looks at me. "I see him watching you."

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I shrug. "So what?" I'm glad to hear someone else has noticed, though. Means I'm not imagining *that*.

"He can't possibly like Samara. I just don't get how he could go from you to her."

I look at her. "Can we stop reminding me that she's his girlfriend now, please?"

"You think she's his girlfriend, or just a plaything?"

I shrug. "Just as bad."

"Really? Wouldn't you be more jealous of an honest-to-God girlfriend than someone he's just fooling around with?"

"Can. We. Not. Discuss. This."

She lifts a hand. "Fine. In fact, let's not talk about guys ever again."

"Agreed. Let's shake on it."

We do.

"But can I just say first—"

"No!"

Just then James raps at the kitchen door.

"Um, are you going to get that?" I ask when she takes another cookie.

"I'm thinking about it," she says between chews.

Sighing, I get up and go to the door.

"Hey, James." I smile as I open the door.

"Hey!" He brushes by me, making a beeline for Sophie.

"Hey, Soph."

"Hey, yourself," she says darkly. "How was the movie?"

"Totally awesome! Your mouth is dirty."

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Oh. Lord.

These two may be brilliant enough to hack into any computer system on the planet, but if they were graded on their social skills, I swear they'd still be in nursery school.

Her face bright red, Sophie makes matters worse by saying, after wiping the crumbs off her mouth, "Well, I didn't stuff my face with popcorn at a movie, so I'm a little hungry."

"Oh, I didn't eat, either. Evanesence isn't into snacking. She's sort of a health nut. I like your hair today," he adds, perhaps by way of an apology. But probably not.

"I like the color purple," she says, obviously flustered. (I think she's trying to compliment him; he's wearing purple jeans.)

"That's a—"

"I can—"

"You go," she says.

"That's a really interesting table." Suddenly he's studying Sophie's kitchen table. "It's like, octagonal. Didn't notice that the last time I was here."

"My father's a mathematician, and he builds stuff," Sophie explains.

"Ah, so that's where you get it from. Are you into gardening, too?"

"Um, no . . ."

"Cuz I have this theory that because of all the math in nature—"

Whaaa?

But Sophie's nodding vigorously. While James doesn't make sense a lot of the time, apparently he's an intellectual genius, just like her. "Perfect shapes and symmetry!" she exclaims.

"Exactly! Don't you think it's weird that people think nature freaks are, like, the opposite of math freaks?"

"Totally!"

And they're off and gabbing about weird intellectual things again.

Until James makes the mistake of mentioning Evanescence again—and again and again. Turns out she's another brilliant mathematician/gardener person, in addition to being a fellow goth who digs vampire movies.

"Cookies!" James says suddenly. Apparently, he hasn't noticed them until now, despite having commented on the crumbs around Sophie's mouth and watching her shove a few into her mouth (after he brought up Evanescence).

"Awesome! No pizza today?"

"Did I invite you for dinner?" Sophie snaps.

"Well, no. I guess I shoulda grabbed something after the movie . . ."

I jump in. "How 'bout you guys get to work, and I'll make some sandwiches."

"No," Sophie protests loudly, crossing her arms.

James looks crestfallen. In a slightly softer tone, she adds, "I don't know what's in the fridge—"

"I'm sure I'll find something," I say. "Now go! Upstairs, you two!"

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They glance at each other and quickly look away. There's a long pause, then Sophie gets up out of her chair and walks over to the staircase, not looking at James.

Thankfully, he follows.

"Hey," I call, "have I told you guys lately how much I love you for doing this?"

No answer.

Sighing, I set to work making sandwiches. Twenty minutes later, when I walk into Sophie's room with a platter of them, they're jumping up and down and hugging each other.

"Did you find him?" I ask, excited.

"We're really, really close!"

Then, to my shock, they kiss.

On the lips.

For a long time.

I look at the sandwiches till they break away from each other, then at Sophie questioningly. She smiles and nods.

So it's official. Clearly, they've talked about their situation, and now Sophie has a boyfriend, and I don't.

I'm totally okay with that.

No, really. I want my friends to be happy.

And James seems like a good guy. A weird one, but a good one.

Sophie tells him (after giving me a questioning look and getting a nod in response) exactly why it's so important to find Simkofsky, and that I'm a thawed Popsicle.

James just looks at me, smiles, and says, "Cool."

Not much can shock these goths, I tell ya.

14

I race out the door after my Wednesday checkup and visit with David and Lauren (no change—sigh), taking an extra moment to study the anticryonics protesters outside the Center for anybody who looks like a taller version of Victor (I'm unsuccessful), when I (literally) crash into Taz. (Again. Can you say “klutz”?)

“Whoa, girl, slow down!”

“Sorry,” I mutter, desperate to get away.

“I'm glad I bumped into you. I wanted to see you, catch up.”

I peer at him, trying to crack that coded message. Does he miss me? Want to tell me he wants to get back together? That he's been a jerk? Did my “date” really work? Is he sick with jealousy? Or is he just teasing me, not wanting me to

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be his girlfriend but wanting me to be the ever-adoring friend?

I have a sudden epiphany. James isn't the only guy who gives out weird mixed messages. They all do it! It's a way of life for them!

Forget that! "I have to go," I mutter, starting to walk away. "Sorry I crashed into you."

But then he puts his hand on my arm and says, "Hey, come on back in. I'm early. Come to the waiting room with me. Catch me up."

Okay, I'm ashamed to say this, but that touch on my arm makes me weak at the knees. (I know. *Such* a loser I am.)

"So what's up with you?" he says when we're seated in the Center's space-age lobby.

"Oh, not much," I tell him.

He looks at me and starts to say something, then stops.

"What's going on with you?" I ask, not really wanting to hear.

He runs a hand through his hair. (Like, is he *trying* to break my heart into a million—as opposed to a mere thousand—pieces?)

"How's Samara?" I hear myself adding. (Good move, Floe. Way to sound like you're totally over him and not jealous at all.)

He looks at me. "You know Samara and I are just friends, right?"

Yeah, right. Friends with benefits, maybe. Or friends in your mind only.

Why did he tell me this, anyway? And why is he looking

at me like that—like he’s trying to talk with his eyes? Is he trying to tell me he wants me back? Is he fishing around for information on my own status? *What?!*

I decide to change the subject. “How’s the smashball team doing?”

He frowns.

Does that mean he’s upset I’ve changed the subject? That he wants to talk more about relationship type stuff—or (God forbid) Samara?

Maybe Mom’s right. Maybe I *am* too young to deal with all this stuff.

He studies me for a second, then says, “We’re doing great. Long Beach gave us a run for our money a few days ago, but then we came back strong.”

“Fab.” I try (but fail) to sound enthusiastic. Even before he broke my heart, I was never the “Go Team!” type.

Awkward pause.

“So we have a pretty good chance at the championship this year,” he adds, probably just to fill the dead-air space. (He’s gotta know I’m totally uninterested in more smashball talk.)

“Great.”

Awkward pause number two.

“So”—this is me trying to fill dead airspace now—“hear any good bands lately?” Wow, I’m *really* desperate. Any talk of live bands will surely also involve talk of—

“Yeah, Samara and I went to see—”

He looks at me in horror, realizing his mistake.

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“Who?” I say, pretending that hearing her name didn’t cut me like a knife.

“Uh . . .” He takes a moment to decide (I’m guessing) whether to address the matter of his mentioning Samara’s name, or to just plow on with his description of the band.

He (wisely) chooses the latter. “Shreak.”

“Metal?”

“Nah. Soul and electronica—sort of like Beck’s 2005 sound.”

I smile nostalgically. “I miss Beck.”

“Me, too.”

He goes on to talk about other artists he’s been listening to, and who else he misses.

None of this, of course, is what I want to hear. What I want to hear is, “When I saw you out with that guy, I was so jealous. I’ve been acting like a jerk. I want you back. I don’t even like Samara. She’s incredibly annoying. And she has bad teeth.” Simple, straightforward, sensible.

“So I don’t buy that nothing’s up with you,” he says when he’s done talking about music. “Spill.”

I decide there’s no longer any reason why I shouldn’t tell him about my plan to find Simkofsky and go after him—maybe he’ll be sorry he gave up a one-of-a-kind woman like me!—so I give him a quick rundown, leaving out the part about my telling Sophie everything, and how much progress she’s made. (I def don’t want Taz insisting on coming along to visit Simkofsky when we find him. That’ll be hard

enough without having to deal with an ex who still turns my knees to jelly.)

He gives me a look when I'm done that could be an admiring one, but could also mean, *Omigod, my loony ex has come up with another crazy scheme!* So before he can say anything, I mumble a quick good-bye, and this time, I make sure to get away.

"Stupid, stupid, stupid," I mutter as I strap on my hoverblades outside the Center.

I've gone a little ways when, lost in agonizing thought (i.e., an excruciating replay of our conversation), I veer off the blading/boarding lane into a hovercar lane, and crash midair with none other than Crimp (in a state-of-the-art, racing-style, red hovercar, natch).

Thankfully, he wasn't going too fast.

We tumble to the (grassy, yay) ground.

"Jeez, sorry about that," I say when he's out of his car (in a flash). "I was sort of lost in thought there. Wasn't concentrating." (How is it I'm *constantly* crashing into people or things?) "Are you okay?"

He laughs and shakes his head. "Don't worry about me. *You* okay?"

"Yeah."

"Jeez, good thing I'd just lifted off."

I start to ask him what he's doing around here when he beats me to it. "Hey, what are you doing in this neck of the woods, anyway?" He snaps his fingers before I can respond. "Oh, yeah, you're the one who made all those wristbands to

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raise money for the Cryonics Center last year. Gotta love that frozen zombie stuff, right?”

“Yeah, right.”

“So the Center’s rockin’, right? Have they figured out how to unfreeze people yet? It’ll be totally sick when there are a whole bunch of thawed zombies walking around Venice!”

A little shiver goes up my spine. He has no idea they already are, and that he’s talking to one.

Wanting, suddenly, to get away from him, too, I say a quick good-bye.

“See ya,” he says, giving me a puzzled look as I fly away.

In practically no time, I’m at Sophie’s.

And it looks like something good might actually happen today.

James and Sophie think they’ve found Simkofsky.

Sophie taps something out on her keyboard, and a map comes onto the screen.

There’s a bright red spot on the map.

Sophie leans in.

James and I do the same.

None of us speak for a moment.

Finally, Soph whispers, “How ’bout that? He’s living right here in Venice.”

15

After a ten-minute-long jumping and screaming session (and another lengthy kiss between Sophie and James—my bff and I are definitely going to have a talk about PDA), I sink onto Sophie's bed and say, "Wow, guess he wanted to be close to her even if he couldn't be with her."

James and Sophie sink down onto the bed, too, and we stay respectfully silent for a minute.

Then Sophie says, "Now what?"

I shrug. "I have to go see him, but I want to approach him with a no-fail game plan, not just rush in all higgledy-piggledy."

"Game plans." James nods sagely. "I'm a big fan. Do you write down your plans?"

"I bet she doesn't," Sophie says.

"Why do you say that?" I'm hurt.

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“Well, let’s face it, Floe. You’re not exactly the planning type.”

“Oh? What’s the planning type?”

“Not you.”

“You’re so wrong! Well, okay, you’re right. But may I remind you that some of the world’s most significant intellectual discoveries were made by accident? No planning?”

Sophie puts a hand on my arm. “Exactly. Which is why you probably don’t *need* a plan. I didn’t mean to suggest being a seat-of-the-pants type is a negative thing.”

“Oh.” I’m somewhat mollified.

“In fact, it would probably be better to just casually drive over there and knock on his door.”

I say I’ll think about that, and then, feeling like a third wheel, I tell them I have to go home cuz I have tons of homework. A big lie. What I do is go home to watch *Return of Deal or No Deal* and drown my sorrows (re: Taz, not finding Simkofsky) in a pot of hot cocoa.

— — —

Before I know it, it’s Thursday, and time for a hoverdriving lesson.

Hooray, right?

“Hello, Floe,” Sergeant—whoops, Mr.—Masterson says levelly on Thursday night. “I still think you should take a break from hoverdriving lessons, think about whether or not you’re ready.”

“Sorry to disappoint you, sir,” I say sweetly. “But I intend

on learning how to hoverdrive, and what's more, I intend on getting my hoverdriving license real soon."

I don't think I imagine that he snorts when he hears this.
"We'll see."

Charming.

I won't even describe what happens during our in-car review session. Then we go over some theory. Which means physics. Which means I suck, basically.

Then we go over the rules of the "road," which I can't for the life of me get. (Who goes when and why? Totally beats me.)

None of this does a whole lot for my confidence level, which is down at around zero for our new in-car lesson.

Today, Zon, Tron, White Lightning, and Jarnel not only make like great drivers, they make like great *stunt* drivers. I mean, the moves they're pulling are not to be believed—somersaults in the air, dives—and Masterson, who's not even supposed to let them do this kind of stuff, just laughs and slaps them on their backs when they land. They even lift off without first achieving acceleration—don't ask me how, and don't ask me why Masterson doesn't totally bite off their heads for this. (He totally would mine!)

It's all so *Top Gun*, I wanna throw up. You'd think this kind of macho crap would have died decades ago. Sadly, no—although White Lightning is a girl, so I guess *that's* progress.

My turn. Solo. Masterson (probably wisely) doesn't let anyone else into the car with me.

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Which makes me even more nervous. They're all huddling, looking at me, whispering, laughing. (I'm so not imagining this. Or the crooked smile Masterson flashes them when he tells them to knock it off. It's obvious he couldn't care less what they say about me. I'd switch hover-driving schools, but it's way too late for that.)

Focus, Ryan, I tell myself, and I do an old breathing exercise (yoga class, circa 2006) that helps me tune everything and everybody else out, focus only on my own self, my own mind.

"Is she doing yoga?" I hear Zon say in disgust.

"That's enough of that breathing crap, Ryan," Masterson says, like I'm defecating on his hovercar or something.

I open my eyes, stride over to the hovercar, and get in. I'm so in the zone (or so I tell myself), I can't miss this time.

I get the motor started, accelerate, achieve liftoff—and weave all over the place and crash to the ground.

"Yeah, good luck with that license thing," Zon says, cracking up. Jarnel can't even talk, he's laughing so hard.

Hi-larious, right?

White Lightning slaps me on the back. "You'll get it, girl."

Masterson just growls, "Inside, Ryan—now."

— — —

It's just Mom and me at home for dinner. Sophie and Andrew have taken Jake to Todd Vee's Restaurant for dinner and toddler-oriented virtual reality games. Mom's made a

good old-fashioned vegetarian lasagna and a California salad. (She's finally managed to master the newfangled stove Sunny insisted on, which has about a thousand controls.)

I dig in appreciatively. There's definitely something to be said for eschewing the virtual game/takeout thing.

"Honey, are you still trying to find that doctor?" she asks, concerned, when we're done.

I lean forward. "We've found him, Mom."

Her eyes widen. "Really?"

"Well, we've located him. Haven't contacted him yet." Again, I refrain from mentioning that I'm actually planning on paying him a visit.

She shakes her head. "I still don't know about this, Floe."

"Mom, you want me and you and Dad and all the other thawed people to live long and prosper, right?" I do the old *Star Trek* Vulcan greeting.

She returns the greeting and smiles wanly. "I told you, I'm just worried about you, hon."

"Well, if somebody—namely me—doesn't find Simkofsky, you'll *really* have to worry about me. And hey, you're the one who signed us up for this cryonics thing."

She looks pained.

"I'm sorry, Mom, I didn't mean that." I really didn't. It's just my hoverdriving lesson talking. "I'm really glad you did." I think. As long as the immune system thing is cured and I don't drop dead in six years, like Dolly the sheep.

She studies me. "I'm not sure *I'm* glad I did it," she says very quietly.

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“You don’t mean that,” I say quickly. “And you’ll see, we’ll find this guy, persuade him to help out at the Center, and everything will get solved.”

She reaches a hand out to touch my cheek. “My brave girl. What you must have gone through when you woke up . . .”

“That was a long time ago, Mom.” Not so long ago—I remember it like it was yesterday—but I can’t tell Mom that.

Poor Mom. She looks so forlorn. I kiss her on the cheek. “Stop worrying. Everything’s fine. Thanks for dinner.”

She smiles wanly. “You’re welcome, sweetie.”

16

“So you really think I should just go and bang on the door?” I ask Sophie in the caf on Friday. (James is at some weird goth art club thing.)

“Your visiting him—isn’t that what this was all about?”

“Well, yeah, but I’m not sure I love the idea of going by myself.”

“I can come with you.”

“Thanks, but it should probably be another thawed kid. Preferably one who has his/her hoverdriving license.” I’m scheduled to take my test tomorrow after school, but I’m pretty pessimistic about the outcome. And Simkofsky’s place, though close to our neighborhood, is in this secluded, wooded area on the edge of a national park—no roads and no bus service.

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“Not the doctors?”

“Definitely not the doctors.”

“There are doctors other than the Dixons at the Center, though, right?”

“Yeah, but Simkofsky will think they’re loyal to the Dixons. Nah. It’s gotta be another frozen zombie. A young one. We’ve got to go for the pity factor. And it should probably be somebody else he’ll remember from Marshland.”

“What’s that about a frozen zombie and Marshland?” I hear a voice ask.

Uh-oh. The voice belongs to Taz.

“Mind if I sit down?” he asks.

Yes, I do mind! What is with guys thinking they can pull this crap when they’ve broken up with you?

Good thing I’m wearing my fave vintage minidress today and my hair looks decent. (He’s wearing skinny white jeans and a rock-and-roll tee. I’m trying really hard not to stare.)

“Go ahead.” I attempt to sound cool and uncaring.

He sits. With his lunch. “So what’s this about needing somebody from the Center to go with you somewhere?”

“It’s nothing,” I say.

“Didn’t sound like nothing,” he says. Again, he glances at Sophie.

I sigh. “Yeah, she knows everything.”

“Oh.” He studies her, as if gauging her trustworthiness. Finally, he says, “So, obviously you’ve made progress on the whole Simkofsky plan. Spill.”

“You’ve given up the right to talk to me like that,” I say evenly.

He looks shocked, and Sophie says, “Um, should I go somewhere for a—”

“No!” I bark. “Stay!”

“I’m not a dog, Floe.”

Great. Now they’re both mad at me.

“Sorry,” I mutter.

“Listen, Floe,” says Taz, “I just wanna know what’s going down.”

Sophie and I exchange glances. She shrugs. I sigh and turn back to Taz.

Something occurs to me. “You don’t . . . have anything, do you?”

He shakes his head. “You?”

“No. I was coughing for a while, but then it stopped.” I look at him. “We could get other viruses that aren’t so easy to shake off. Our immune systems are weak.”

Taz frowns. “Funny, Dixon didn’t explain it to me that way. I never realized I could get a more serious illness.”

“Yeah, I know. Abe’s not the best communicator. Listen, Sophie’s managed to locate Simkofsky—turns out he’s right here in Venice—and I’m planning to pay him a little visit.”

He’s back to looking at me like I’m crazy.

Sigh.

But then he says, “You never cease to amaze me, kid.”

Okay, the “kid” bugs me, but I like that I amaze him. If he means it in a good way. Then again, if he means it in a

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good way, it means that he's playing head games again. Guys who break up with you shouldn't be allowed to give you compliments after they break up with you. It leads to hoping, and hoping is bad if there's nothing to hope for.

"So you haven't talked to him yet," he continues.

I shake my head. Maybe now he'll leave.

"I'm going with you," he says.

Yikes! That's just what I was afraid of! "Um, no need."

Soph looks at me like I'm insane. "Floe, what are you talking about. Of course, there's a ne—"

"It's all perfectly under control," I say smoothly, glaring at Sophie.

Taz looks at me, then at Sophie. "Don't think so."

I sigh again. "Okay, I *could* use someone to tag along for moral support and to help me explain why we need his help." I decide not to mention the driving thing. There's still a chance I could get my license, right? Right?

"And the Dixons are out."

"Obviously. Ditto any doctors associated with them."

"We're associated with Abe and Bea, too."

"Yeah, but we've been preserved and 'thawed.' He's gotta be fascinated by that. And the fact that we're kids—"

"Hey, speak for yourself!" Taz says good-naturedly.

"—can only work in our favor," I finish. "How can he say no to helping a couple of poor, innocent teens who were signed up for cryonics by their parents?"

He nods. "I think you're bang on. So it's settled. I'm coming with."

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I look at him. “Just out of curiosity, *why* do you want to come?”

“Because I want to help. And I don’t want to worry about you.”

And I want to spend time with you. I’ve been a fool, is what I want to hear him say next. But of course, he doesn’t.

I’m grateful. But afraid to say yes. Do I really want to spend that much time alone on the road (er, in the air) with my ex?

Do I have a choice?

Two of us would have double the impact.

And there is the possibility that I’ll need him to hover-drive to Simkofsky’s.

“Fine. Come.”

He grins. “Great. When are we leaving?”

“Sometime the day after tomorrow. After I get my hover-driving license.” How’s that for optimism?

“Good luck,” he says. “You’ll do great.” He reaches out to give my hand a squeeze, and I have to restrain myself from jumping out of my seat.

Going on this little trip with him is so not a good idea.

Sophie clears her throat and says, “I’m off to computer club, kids. Floe, we’ll talk later about the whens and wheres.”

“Yeah, okay,” I say as casually as I can.

After she leaves, I concentrate on my veggie sushi.

“Nice girl,” Taz says.

“Mmmm.”

“You’ve been hanging out a lot with that Trey guy, too,” he says.

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I don't correct him. "Mmmm."

"Are you just going to keep saying 'Mmmm,' or are you actually going to answer me with real words?"

I stare at him. "What do you want from me, Taz? You're the one who broke up with me, remember?"

"Yeah," he says softly. Giving me an intense look (whoa, can't handle that now that he's not mine), he adds, "The only problem is I can't really remember why."

There they are: the head games. Suddenly, I'm furious. "Allow me to remind you. You're confused; you don't know what's going to happen up the road. You're going to college. You're not sure you want to be stuck with your high school girlfriend—"

"Hey, I never said—"

"Of course you did," I snap. "That's what this is all about—your immaturity!"

Now it's his turn to stare at me.

Okay, I may have gone a bit too far with that immaturity comment.

"Immaturity?" he repeats. "You think I'm immature? You think confusion is the same as immaturity?" He crosses his arms. "What about throwing yourself at a younger guy? Is that your definition of maturity?"

"Going out with a guy one year younger than me isn't exactly robbing the cradle, Taz. And I never threw myself at—"

I notice a couple of people staring, so I lower my voice and hiss, "I didn't throw myself at Trey. He liked—likes—me. Can I help that?"

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“You can help how you react to it!”

I glare daggers at him. “Why are you assuming I wasn’t—I’m not—equally interested? And can’t *you* help how you can react to Samara pawing you all the time?”

“Please tell me you’re not jealous of Samara. That’s just the way she is.”

I roll my eyes. “Oh, spare me. Why are guys so *stupid*? Oh, wait a minute. *I’m* the stupid one! You don’t think that’s the way she is at all! You’re just saying that so you can *justify* her pawing you all the time!”

“Is that what you think?” he asks hotly.

“Yeah, that’s what I think!”

“Oh, and you’ve done so much to discourage Trey!”

“I told you, I don’t *want* to discourage Trey!”

“Oh, you like them young and dumb now, huh?”

“He’s not young and dumb—he’s sweet”—*not!*—“unlike someone else I know!”

“Watch it, Floe,” he says angrily.

“No, *you* watch it. And you know what? I don’t think I want you coming along to visit Dr. Simkofsky, after all.”

“Well, guess what,” he says, standing. “You don’t have a choice. I’m coming whether you like it or not.”

“You—can’t do that!” I sputter. “This is *my* mission!”

“Yeah, well, it’s *my* mission now, too,” he says.

“I forbid you to come!”

“You forbid me?” he says, laughing.

“Yeah! Taz, you can’t come!”

He looks at me. “Watch me.”

Chowing down some toast Saturday morning, the day of my hoverdriving test, I hear on the kitchen TV that a famous motivational speaker named Romy Dobbins is going to be speaking on the beach. I've seen this guy's commercials. He's the real deal, written books and everything. Yeah, it's more the lack of hardwired technical expertise that's tripping me up with hoverdriving, but I figure a little motivational pep talk the day of my test can't hurt.

I make sure to get there early, to score a good spot in front.

"Hi," I say to the girl next to me, who's reading a copy of Dobbins's latest book.

"Hi." She looks me straight in the eye and extends a hand. "Leila Darby," she says loudly. "A pleasure."

"Er, likewise," I respond, shaking her hand limply.

She grins and holds up the book with her other hand. "I'm practicing his techniques. 'Act like a success, and you'll be a success.'"

"Huh, interesting," I say.

"Spoken like a nonbeliever."

"Well," I hedge (don't want to tick anybody off, get into anything big before my test), "it's just that I think life is a little more complicated than that. Not everyone who wants to be a success and acts like he or she deserves success is *going* to be successful. You may not be able to develop the skills you need, or there may be circumstances—"

"Can't think negatively," a younger version of Dobbins booms out on my other side. Great, I'm surrounded by positive thinkers. I'm of the opinion that positive thinking is vastly overrated. Far better to think long and hard about all the terrible things that can happen to you so you'll be prepared for the worst.

Things like failing my hoverdriving test, not being able to find Simkofsky, developing a deadly virus, dying (again) . . .

Okay, so maybe positive thinking does have its merits.

Leila and Roger promptly get into a spirited discussion of Dobbins's principles, as set out in his three best-selling books, which impress me less and less the more I hear about them. Sounds to me like, for each new book, Dobbins just comes up with a bunch of new catchphrases, then pads the pages with a whole lot of (quite possibly fictional) anecdotes.

My feelings about the guy are confirmed when Dobbins strides out onto the beach in a white linen tunic and white

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pants (he seems to be going for an all-American swami type look), flashes his pearly whites, and launches into a loooooong story about a guy he supposedly just advised who ended up getting a job that paid only slightly less than what J. K. Rowling earned on the Harry Potter books.

Do people buy this stuff? I mean, really. Is it wishful thinking? Desperation? What?

Glancing at Roger and Leila, busy nodding their heads vigorously (it's a cult, I suddenly decide), I wonder why I ever thought it was a good idea to come here today.

"Go," I hear Leila whispering into my ear.

Snapping out of my reverie, I realize Dobbins has been calling for a volunteer, and he's fixed on me.

"But," I sputter, "I didn't volunteer."

Dobbins laughs.

Everyone else laughs, too.

"Have you read my books?" he asks, an eyebrow quirked.

"Um, no."

"I didn't think so. If you did, you'd know that I recommend never saying no to an opportunity. You came to see me hoping I could help you in some way, right?"

"Right," I admit.

"Yet when I called you up and you had the opportunity to get some private attention, you turned it down. Why?"

Because I've decided you're a moron, I think but don't say. Hey, maybe I could get something out of a little one-on-one. Even if said one-on-one is in front of a couple hundred people.

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Dobbins grabs me by the elbow and moves me to center “stage.” “First, tell everyone your name,” Dobbins says.

“It’s . . . Floe.”

“Great to meet you, Floe. Tell me, Floe, what made you come out today?”

“I’m, um, having trouble hoverdriving. I’m taking my license test this afternoon, and I needed a pep talk.”

“Floe, I don’t know you very well, but I can tell an awful lot about a person just by looking at them. And Floe, in you I see someone who says no to success.”

No, I say no to morons, I think. My first impression was definitely correct.

“You have to really want it, Floe.”

Oh, Lord, I think. I could have been practicing . . .

“You have to say yes to success, Floe!”

Uh-oh. I think I know what’s coming.

“Can you say yes to success, Floe?” he roars.

I pretend not to hear him.

He puts a hand to his ear. “I can’t hear you, Floe!”

“Yes,” I mutter. *May your pearly white teeth rot and fall out, you big fat phony.*

“I still can’t hear you, Floe!”

Oh, for Pete’s sake—

“I need you to shout it out, Floe!”

I cross my arms. “I’m not really a shouter.”

“Say yes to success, Floe! Who wants Floe to say yes to success? Everybody say, ‘We do!’”

“We do!” the crowd roars.

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“Hear that, Floe? Everyone wants you to say yes to success! So let’s hear it!”

I’m not going to get away until I yell it, so I yell, “Yes.”

“I dunno, folks. I’m still not convinced. Are you convinced?”

“No!” everybody yells.

I look at my watch. All is not lost. I’ll just excuse myself and go home. Dobbins has turned to face another part of the crowd, and I take the opportunity to sneak away.

I stop in my tracks. Holy crap. I’ve caught the eye of a taller version of Victor in the crowd . . . who’s taking off!

“She’s turning down the opportunity again!” somebody yells.

Double crap. No way I’ll be able to go after him now. Not that I’d be able to catch up with him or know what to do or say to him even if I did.

I sigh and remind myself there are a lot of tall, nerdy guys out there. Can’t let that overactive imagination run away with me . . .

“Say yes to success!” the person beside the rat fink calls out. I glare at him.

Dobbins, who’s turned back to face me, grins and shakes his head. (As in, *You naughty girl. Now I’m really going to have to teach you a lesson!*)

Stupid, I berate myself. *There are two hundred people here. And they’re all brainwashed. Did you think they’d just let you get away with that?*

Now Dobbins puts his hands on my shoulders, looks me

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in the eye in a faux-intense way, and says, "I really want to help you, Floe."

"You can help me by letting me go home and practice my hoverdriving," I say through clenched teeth.

He turns back to the crowd. "She thinks she just needs to practice her hoverdriving. Do you think that's all it's going to take for her to achieve success this afternoon, folks?"

"No!" they shout.

"What does Floe need to do?" he asks. Again, the hand is up at his ear.

"Say yes to success!" they shout.

God, this is all so idiotic. This crap has been around for ages. Although for all I know, the self-help movement died during the ten years I was sleeping and now it's back with a vengeance.

I decide not to fight Dobbins anymore. Best to just let him accomplish whatever he wants to accomplish with me, then take off. The more I put up a fuss, the more likely he is to hold me prisoner until he can save face in front of the crowd.

Much as it pains me to help him in his quest to make people believe he can make lions out of mice, I do just that.

"You're right," I say suddenly. "I have to say yes to success! I don't know why I haven't until now!"

He looks at me a little suspiciously, then turns to the audience, raises his arms, and says, "Did you all hear that? What did Floe just agree to do?"

He puts a hand to his ear when they all scream, "Say yes to success!"

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“Say it, Floe,” he commands me.

“Yes to success!” I shout like a crazy person.

“Say it again!”

Curse you, you evil, money-grabbing charlatan. “Yes to success!” I repeat.

He starts to say something else, but I cut him off. “No to negativity! Yes to success!”

There’s a roar of approval from the crowd.

I pump my fists in the air. “Success and empowerment to all!”

Another roar.

“Money and fame to all!” I scream.

Dobbins has a mile-wide smile on his face.

I point to him. “He has it. Why can’t you?”

Dobbins nods and gestures for the crowd to keep cheering.

“So go for it—even if you have to lie or cheat or manipulate innocent people to get it!”

“Okay, time to go,” Dobbins says quietly but threateningly, motioning for two goons in the front to escort me off the “stage.”

When we’re a few yards away from Dobbins, I say, “You two had better take your paws off of me *now*.”

They look at each other and shrug, as if deciding I’m not worth any trouble. When they let go of me, I start to run as fast as I can in the direction of my house.

At least today’s session was free, I tell myself on my way home. Normally, Dobbins charges several hundred dollars to attend one of his seminars. Which could explain why this

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particular “lecture” was filled with useless, as opposed to hard, information. His pricey hardcovers seem similarly filled with useless info. He probably uses the books to get people to come to the expensive lectures . . .

Oh, wow, I’m spending waaaay too much time thinking about this guy.

I now realize there’s only one way to accomplish something, and that’s by putting in a lot of plain, old-fashioned work.

Maybe I slacked off a little too much in hoverdriving class.

It’s time to buckle down.

Although it may be a little late for that.

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A couple of hours later, I'm gaping like a tourist at the Venice Beach Hoverdriving Test Facility, where the instructors really do wear *Top Gun*-style outfits!

Can you say *intimidating*?

"I'm, um, here to take my test?" I tell the old and mean-looking woman registering people, after standing in line for about ten minutes.

"Name?" she says stiffly.

"Floë Ryan," I say.

After poking around on her computer for a couple of seconds, she says, "Don't have you here."

"No—no, you have to! I have to take my test today so I can—" I stop myself. Forcing myself to calm down, I say, "I registered several weeks ago."

Unbelievable. All the technical advances, and the world is still full of stupid glitches.

“You’re not showing up.”

Duh! “I realize that,” I say as calmly as I’m able to. Just then, I remember I printed out my registration confirmation and stuck it in my purse. (So 2006—nobody prints out confirmations anymore cuz it’s supposedly so rare for computers to mess up.) Triumphant, I whip it out, say, “Look!” and savor the satisfaction when she purses her lips, scribbles something on a sheet, and tells me to take it over to the next desk.

Which is manned by a slacker type who seems barely able to read the printout.

“So . . . your test is today?”

“It’s supposed to be, yeah.”

“So . . . what’s the problem?”

“This is my registration printout, but for some reason, I’m not on today’s test schedule.”

“Who told you that?”

I point to the mean old lady.

“Ah!” He nods.

“What does that mean?”

He shrugs, as if to say, *Well, look at her—she’s old.*

I tap my fingers on the counter. “So how do we get this fixed?”

He scratches his head. Then a light seems to go on, and he types something into his computer. After a few seconds, he winks at me and gestures me over to the waiting area.

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“Everything’s okay now?” I ask.

“I put you on the schedule,” he whispers.

“Thanks,” I whisper back. I wonder for a second if that makes him a cracker, then I decide I don’t much care.

Twenty minutes later, I’m finally on the hoverdriving test course. (How thankful am I that the test is on a course and not on real roads, where I could—and surely would—crash into other hovercars?)

Okay, forget I said that. There are about a hundred other cars on the course!

I can barely manage to start the motor.

Then I can barely manage to accelerate.

Cam, my tester—his name is on his chest—has arranged his lips in a grim line. We’re hovering shakily in the air when he says through gritted teeth, “Head south for a while—follow that blue hovercar.”

Whoever’s driving the blue hovercar is doing a great job. It’s gliding along confidently, perkily.

Unlike mine, which is chugging along haltingly, sluggishly.

“Um, is there something wrong with this hovercar?” I ask, hoping desperately that Cam will think maybe this is all the car’s fault and not mine.

But hey, at least I got the thing in the air!

There’s a sharp wind, and suddenly, the hovercar’s *really* hard to control. It’s leaping ahead—and looks like it’s going to collide with the blue hovercar!

“Slow down!” Cam screeches.

“I—can’t . . . I’m trying, but I can’t!”

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Cam shouts out a series of instructions, none of which I understand.

Did I even *have* a wind lesson with Masterson?

“Pass him!” Cam yells.

Pass him? *Pass him?*

I don’t recall ever having passed anyone, either. I think I’d remember, what with all the trouble I have with those laser beam markings.

Again, Cam barks a bunch of instructions, none of which I understand.

Luckily, Blue Hovercar sees me in his rear window and gets out of the way.

The wind stops.

I slow down, thank God.

“You *were* going to pass him, right?” Cam says.

My spirits rise; I suddenly suspect Cam thinks I’m a much better driver than I am. He probably thinks I’m just really nervous, and that I freaked when that huge wind came. (That *was* really out of the ordinary.) It’s only natural that I froze and failed to slow down or pass the hovercar.

My suspicions are confirmed when Cam smiles at me and says, “No harm done.”

I smile back gratefully.

Cam has me just drive a bit, and I actually do okay for a while. All I have to do is stop and go.

I even start enjoying myself.

Always a bad sign.

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“So,” Cam says after a while, “see that gold hovercar parked up there?” He points.

“Yup.”

“And the silver one two spots behind it?”

Oh, God, I think I know what’s coming.

“Parallel hoverpark between them, please.”

Would you believe I’d actually deluded myself into thinking I wasn’t going to have to parallel hoverpark today?

You can do it, Floe, I tell myself.

I concentrate very hard, trying to recall every word Masterson spoke about hoverparking.

I can’t recall much.

Okay, I can’t recall anything.

I don’t move.

Cam’s drawing his mouth into a line. “Ms. Ryan, do you not *know* how to parallel hoverpark?”

“What? Not *know*! Don’t be ridiculous!” Even I hear the somewhat frantic quality to my voice.

“If you know how to parallel hoverpark, why aren’t you doing it?”

“Because, um . . .” Wow, I really should have known this was coming and prepared an excuse.

“Ms. Ryan, a lot of people don’t get their hoverdriving license on their first try. If you feel you need more lessons—”

“No, you don’t understand—I have to get my hoverdriving license today!” And yet I still don’t move.

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“Ms. Ryan, are you going to attempt to hoverpark this vehicle or not?”

What the heck. Might as well try.

So I try, and—you guessed it—manage to crash into not one, but both hovercars.

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“Floe, would you at least look at me?”

“I’m not *not* looking at you,” I say to Taz, not looking at him. He’s at my house the next day, talking as if we never argued, as if I never forbade him to accompany me to Simkofsky’s.

“Look, Floe, Sophie told me you failed your test. Lots of people fail their hoverdriving test the first time out. It’s nothing to be ashamed of.”

“I know that!”

“And you need another frozen zombie to come with you to Simkofsky’s and someone to hoverdrive you. So here I am to serve both functions.”

About twenty minutes later, worn down, I’m seated in Taz’s groovy purple hovercar, which is so small, our black

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legs (we're wearing matching skinny jeans) can't help but touch. Which, once upon a time, I might have thought was a good thing, but now I think—no, now I *know*—is most definitely *not* a good thing. I am way too attracted to the owner of the leg touching mine. Even if he is a slimeball.

Okay, so I don't really think Taz is a slimeball.

Even though he did break up with me.

And even though he flirts with Samara.

And even though he only decided he might want me back after seeing me get cozy with somebody else.

Would it be completely undignified and shameful if I hurled myself into Taz's lap and kissed him?

Um, probably, yeah.

Focus, Floe, I command myself.

"Okay then, let's go," I say as coolly as I can. "You may engage the motor."

"'You may engage the motor?'" He laughs. "What is this? *Star Trek: The Final Generation*?"

I glare at him. "We're on a mission, and I'm trying to act in an adult, professional way."

He coughs. "Yes, of course. I shall proceed to engage the motor directly."

"There's no need for sarcasm."

He grins, engages the motor, accelerates, and achieves liftoff really quickly and easily, which ticks me off even more.

We sit in silence for a while.

Finally, he says, "Is it going to be like this the whole way?"

Beyond Cool

"You wanted to come."

"I wanted to help you."

"You wanted to get back into my pants."

"I was never in your pants," he says in this amused way, which infuriates me.

"You know what I mean. You want to play games."

"Do not."

"Do, too."

"What do you mean by games, anyway?"

"You know."

He sighs. "No, I don't."

"If you don't know, I'm not about to explain it to you."

Can you say "mature"?

"Can we please just not talk about this?"

"Okay, you're right. We should keep this professional. Tell me more about how Sophie found Simkofsky."

I'm grateful for the subject change—anything to stop bickering—and the distraction from Taz's leg, which is still touching mine.

I tell him what I know (which isn't much, as I'm no computer nerd). When I'm done, he whistles and says, "Wow, that's some story."

"Yeah," I say. "Sophie's really something."

He shoots me a sideways glance. I can't help but be envious of his ability to shoot sexy sideways glances while hoverdriving, as I can't even manage the hoverdriving part.

"You're really something, too. Don't bite my head off—it's true. I'm sure she needed to be motivated and encour-

aged when the going got tough. You're great at getting people to do stuff."

Oh, Lord, this is no good at all. Now I not only have to deal with the leg thing, I have to hear his sexy voice direct compliments at me.

"Yeah, I'm really something. I'm a frozen zombie," I say. "Who does not want to live fast, die young, and make a good-looking corpse."

"Been there, done that," he deadpans.

I can't help but smile. "Touché. But what I was trying to say was that anybody in my situation would have done the same thing."

"You're wrong about that. Look at me. I'm in the same situation, and what did I do?"

"You're doing a lot now."

He gives me another sidelong glance. (I attempt to send him a telepathic message: *Stop that! You're killing me here!*) "So you finally agree I'm coming in handy?"

"Ah, a trap!"

"You bet."

"Okay, fine, you win." What the heck. We're going to be stuck together for the afternoon. "I appreciate your doing the driving today."

"Thank you."

We drive in silence for a while, but this time, the silence isn't tense, it's comfortable.

We're heading into an area I've never ventured into before: a wooded area about a mile from Venice National Park.

Beyond Cool

After a minute, Taz slows down and swerves to avoid a clump of trees—branches are starting to hit the windshield regularly. It's extra hard to hoverdrive in wooded areas cuz there are no laser beam markings (not that they're ever much help), and the trees get in the way. I'm actually *really* glad I'm not driving today.

"Floe," he says while swerving, "have you considered the fact that this guy might be totally off his rocker?"

I sigh. "Honestly, you and my mom. Good thing I didn't tell the Dixons."

Inside, I'm not quite so flip. Making our way through the dense forest where our reclusive savior supposedly lives, it's finally sinking in that this guy probably *is* utterly and completely loony.

Which makes me very grateful, indeed, that Taz is along for the ride and the meet and greet.

Though I'm not about to tell him that. Again.

I'm jolted out of my reverie when the hovercar hits a large tree limb.

Taz curses, and then, before I know it, we're falling. Luckily, we land on a grassy patch.

Taz lets out another steady stream of curse words, then turns to me and says, "You okay?"

"Sure. Peachy."

"I'm really sorry. . . ."

"It can't be easy to drive here. I'm surprised you got as far as you did." I look out the window. Nothing but trees and the odd grassy patch.

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“The car’s probably still okay. Lemme see if I can achieve liftoff.”

“Now who’s being all *Star Trek*?” I say teasingly. I look back at him to see him staring in horror at his arm.

His bleeding arm.

And the next thing I know, he’s telling me he thinks *I* have to hoverdrive the rest of the way to Simkofsky’s place.

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“No,” I say, shaking my head. “Don’t be ridiculous.” I take a closer look at his arm. “Taz, it’s just a scratch; it’s not broken or anything.” (I know cuz I took some emergency first aid courses way back when I was blading competitively.)

He smiles wanly and shuts his eyes. With a sinking heart, I remember he can’t stand the sight of blood. Even the teeniest bit of it. Which I used to find adorable and endearing.

Uh-oh, he looks like he might faint. “Can’t drive, Floe. You’re . . . gonna have to.”

“I don’t think you understand,” I say, whipping a bandage out of my purse and quickly covering his scratch with it. “If I drive, we’ll die.”

“No . . . *I* drive, we die,” he murmurs. “Floe, fail . . . means nothing . . .”

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I shake him a little bit. "Hey, Taz, stay awake."

"No," he mutters. "Sleep now."

"No, don't sleep!" I say.

Holy crap, he actually fainted cuz of a scratch!

Sighing, I get out of the car, go over to the driver's side, open the door, and shove him over.

Which is when I hear another hovercar in the near distance.

Great! A rescuer!

Then I catch a glimpse of the hovercar in the rearview mirror.

It's being driven by the guy I saw running away from Sophie's house. The guy I saw on the beach.

Whaddya know, I *wasn't* imagining my stalker.

Running away would probably be smart.

Unfortunately, I'm stuck in a forest with a semiconscious former boyfriend and a possibly incapacitated hovercar.

No way I'm gonna save the day this time. This ain't no Disney movie.

"Turn over!" I mutter to the engine—and to my infinite relief—*Thank you, oh infinite being!*—it finally does.

Accelerating is quite a different story. I can't build up enough speed on the uneven terrain to achieve liftoff.

Meanwhile, my stalker's gaining on me.

"Go, go, go," I mutter. "Please," I add as an afterthought.

Whaddya know? It really is a magic word. The hovercar starts to go.

And then it stops.

Beyond Cool

Because I've just run into a rock.
We're doomed.
There is one thing I can try.
Achieving liftoff without acceleration.
I know it can be done, cuz the showoffs in my driving
class did it. But I have no idea how. And Taz is still out.
Maybe it's as simple as skipping the acceleration thing.
I try frantically to remember the steps for achieving liftoff.
The hovercar shakes a little, and I get excited.
Too soon. The shaking stops.
I bang on the dashboard. (Not sure why.)
Nothing.
I stamp my foot on the floor.
No, I didn't really expect that to work.
I murmur some soothing words to the car. (I am, after all,
Floe, Daughter of Venice Beach Hippies.)
Nothing. (And no, I didn't expect that to work, either.
But I'm getting desperate.)
I look in the rearview mirror.
Stalker Guy's still a fair distance away.
Then he's really close.
I repeat the liftoff steps.
And joy of joys, the hovercar actually lifts up into the air.
"Thank you, thank you, thank you," I mutter.
Not that I'm out of the woods—literally or figuratively—
just yet.
He's right on my tail.
Taz cracks an eye open. "Turbo . . ."

Yay! Taz is coming to! “Omigod, turbo! How did I forget about turbo! You’re a genius!”

We were told about the hovercar’s turbo capacity in hover-driving class, but were also warned never to use it. (So why do these cars even *have* turbo capacity? Guess it’s just human nature. Boys and their toys and all that. Everybody wants gizmos that can do more, even if they don’t need more to be done.)

I press turbo, and we pitch ahead into the air.

“Woohoo!” I yell.

My excitement is short-lived.

Because, of course, Stalker Guy’s hovercar is at turbo capacity, too.

“Cousin tricked it out with . . . superturbo,” Taz mutters.

“What?” I yell frantically. “What’s that? Taz—don’t faint again! What did you say? Your cousin tricked out your hovercar? It has some kind of superturbo capacity?”

“Yeah.” He chuckles. “Not . . . legal . . .”

“Taz, do *not* fall back asleep! How do I get it to superturbo?”

“Hold turbo . . . ten seconds . . .”

“Hold down the turbo button for ten seconds?” I’m doubtful that’s gonna work, but I do it anyway.

And whaddya know, it works! We zoom ahead, leaving Stalker Guy in our dust!

Until he zooms, too.

I know, right? What was I thinking? Yeah, like a couple of teenagers are gonna outrace a criminal with their cool, tricked-out car. Oooh, illegal superturbo capacity!

Beyond Cool

Stalker Guy's car is probably *stolen!* His whole *life* is illegal!

Suddenly, I'm very, very tired.

And Stalker Guy's bumping my tail.

And then he's beside me.

And then he's in front of me.

"Land immediately," I hear a bullhorn-distorted voice say.

Yeah, right.

I go straight up.

Until the car stops and zooms down.

All the way down.

Luckily, we land in a bush.

“Holy crap,” Taz says, instantly wide awake.

Stalker Guy has landed, too (much more elegantly than I), and has come out of his car.

“Who’s he?” Taz asks.

“Stalker Guy.”

“Who’s Stalker Guy?”

Before I can respond, Stalker Guy’s opening the hovercar door, grabbing us (he manages the two of us easily), throwing us down roughly at the base of a tree, and tying our wrists to it. I yell, “Easy on him, he’s hurt!” Well, it’s just a scratch, but hey, I’ll take any advantage.

No answer.

“What do you want with us anyway?”

Beyond Cool

“Oh, I think you know, Floe,” Stalker Guy says, smiling creepily. “My main purpose here is to slow you down, keep you from visiting the good doctor.”

Wha . . . ?

The anticryonics activists are politically strident, not *violent!*

“Are you working alone?” Taz says, reading my mind. Obviously, he doesn’t recognize the guy as one of the Center’s regular protesters, either.

Stalker Guy smiles, sending chills up my spine. “The others would never go as far as we need to go. They were happy enough when I located Simkofsky”—Wow, he beat us to it!—“happy about his little breakdown.” He wags a finger at me. “We definitely don’t need another doctor, especially a former associate, helping Dixon figure out how to thaw people, young lady!”

Taz and I exchange a glance. Excellent. He doesn’t know we’re frozen zombies, that Dixon’s already figured it out.

“When did you realize we were looking for him?” I ask.

“Well, I’m somewhat of a computer whiz myself, like your friend Sophie,” he says immodestly (i.e., psychotically). “Discovered her hacking online, *et voilà*. Here I am.”

“So exactly how far are you willing to go here?” Taz asks. “You’ve already assaulted us. Would you go so far as to kill us”—hello, *what?*—“to achieve your end?”

He shrugs. “The end justifies the means, don’t you think?”

“No, I don’t,” I snap.

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“Me neither,” Taz says. “Listen, I don’t know—”

Stalker Guy cuts him off, saying, “I’m sorry, I’m going to have to take temporary leave of you. He glares at me. “You made my bumper fall off. Don’t try any funny stuff.”

Wow, I can’t believe criminals actually say, “Don’t try any funny stuff.”

Taz and I watch him take off in his hovercar.

“Any brilliant ideas?” I ask once he’s gone.

“Not a one,” he says.

Silence.

“Do you think he’s planning on hurting us?” I ask.

“Nah,” he says. “I doubt he wants to be pinned with a double murder rap.”

Can I believe this?

I decide I can.

“Maybe we’ll come up with something while we’re sitting here,” I say.

“Maybe.”

More silence.

“Sorry I was such a wuss about the cut,” Taz says. “You did a great job of driving up there, BTW.”

“I did?” I smile wanly. “Yeah, I did. Lot of good it did us. And I totally understand about the blood thing.”

“Thanks.” Pause. “You definitely should have gotten your license.”

“Thanks. That means a lot to me.”

“Being—”

Beyond Cool

“I just wanted to say—”

“Sorry, what?”

“No, you first.”

He looks at me and says, “Being here with you—in this situation—makes me realize how much you mean to me.”

“What situation?” I say lightly, not ready to deal with his words just yet. “Are you implying we’re in some sort of danger? Thought you said he wasn’t interested in hurting us.”

“He’s not,” he says. “Floe, I’ve been a jerk.”

I shake my head. “You don’t have to say anything. We’re gonna be fine. Stop acting like you have to make everything right. If you want to apologize, do it when we’re out of this mess.”

Now it’s his turn to shake his head. “No. Since we broke up, I’ve been doing a lot of thinking, and this situation’s made me even more sure I’m right. I finally know what I want to do, where I want to be . . . who I want to be with.”

My heart starts to pound a little faster. “Do tell.”

“I want to stay in California. I’ve had enough change for a lifetime—several lifetimes—in the past little while. I want to study music. And I want to be with you. If you’ll still be my girlfriend.”

My heart catches in my throat. “You’ll be a college guy. You sure you want a high school girlfriend?”

“You’ll be a senior next year. We’re only a year apart.”

“But you’ll probably be living on campus—”

“I told you, I’ve had enough change for a few lifetimes.

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I'm gonna live at home. I can hoverdrive to the campus in the mornings."

"Are . . . you sure that's what you want?"

He looks into my eyes deeply. "I'm sure."

"Wow," I murmur. The moment is somewhat wrecked by the fact that we can't kiss.

"But are you sure you want me?"

I look at him like he's crazy. "You're kidding, right?"

"So you're not ticked off at me?"

"Well, I do think you should have talked to me about everything you were feeling."

He nods. "I should have. I'm sorry."

We're quiet for a while. Then I say, "If this Simkofsky thing doesn't work—"

"It'll work," he says fiercely. "It has to."

Just then we hear a hovercar land behind us, and we practically jump right out of our ropes.

It's . . . Sophie and James!

I grin at Sophie as she runs out of the car toward me. "My heroine."

She grins back. "Pretty good job of driving, kiddo. You almost got away."

"But I didn't."

"Not for lack of trying."

"Hey, how did you know where to find us?"

Sophie rolls her eyes. "You think I sent you out without a combo tracking device/camera?" She goes for the point in

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the V of my V-necked T-shirt and extracts a chip the size of a pinhead.

“How—when . . .?”

She doesn't answer, just cuts us loose from our ropes with James's help. “Ropes,” she says contemptuously. “So twentieth century. Like, how techno-deficient is this guy? First following you in person—sorry I didn't believe you, by the way—now *ropes*.”

I stare at the device Sophie's just yanked off my shirt. The camera in it must be the size of a dust mite!

“I don't think we've met,” Taz says to James, who's cutting him loose. “I've seen you around VBA.”

“Oh, sorry,” I say. “Taz, this is James. James, Taz.”

Taz and James shake hands. “Thanks, man,” Taz says. “Really appreciate it.”

“No problem,” James says. “Glad to do my part to eradicate goth stereotyping.”

“Uh, right.”

“So, we'd better get out of here,” I say nervously. “Stalker Guy's gonna be back soon.”

“Oh, but he's already back,” a voice says. (Damn—the sound of Sophie and James's hovercar must have drowned out the sound of his!) He steps out from behind a tree and points a gun at us. “And he's not very happy about what's transpired here.”

Uh-oh. This is *not* good.

“Hey, man, I know you don't want any serious trouble,”

Taz says, holding up a hand. "Why don't you just let us go? This has gone far enough. We promise we won't say anything about your little stunt."

"Do you honestly believe I can let you go—that I ever intended to let you go?"

"C'mon, listen, you're just an anticryonics activist. You do what you do because you think it's right. I can respect that. But you don't want to get in any trouble—"

Stalker Guy laughs. "You're so wrong. I've been in trouble all my life. I couldn't care less."

None of us have anything to say to that.

He smiles at Sophie, who's holding the tracking device. "Nice one. Where'd you get it?"

Sophie tosses her ponytail. "Like I'd ever tell you."

The smile disappears. "You'd *better* tell me, girly."

He moves threateningly toward her, and when he makes like he's about to pull the trigger, James throws something in his direction. Suddenly, there's an explosive sound, and the air around Stalker Guy gets hazy.

Taz and I start to run, but Sophie says, "No need."

When the air clears a second later, we see Stalker Guy is slumped on the ground, his eyes closed.

I stare. "What . . . how . . .?"

"Hey, we're scientific geniuses, right? He, um, won't be bothering anybody for a while. Now let's get out of here. To the hovercar!" Sophie gestures to the car she and James came in on.

Beyond Cool

We're all about to pile in when Sophie turns to me and says, "Floe, I think you should drive."

"Really?" I don't let on how tickled I am.

They all grin and nod.

We all settle in.

"Take it away," Sophie says.

"My pleasure." I engage the motor, accelerate on the dirt clearing she landed on, and achieve liftoff in a matter of seconds.

Piece of cake.

22

“Nervous?” Taz, beside me in the front passenger seat, asks softly.

“After what we’ve just been through? Nah.” I smile at him (Hey, I can do the sideways thing, too!) and add, “Well, okay. Yeah. A little. But thinking about meeting Simkofsky is taking my mind off of what just happened, so that’s good.”

“I agree.” He shoots me a concerned look. “You okay?”

I nod. The whole episode with Stalker Guy shook me up, but hey, it got me a confession of love from my man and made me into one awesome hoverdriver, so things definitely could have been worse.

“You okay?” I ask Taz.

He nods. “Yeah.” He pauses. “But listen, Floe, I’ve been

Beyond Cool

thinking: This guy really could be a total nutbar. Who knows how he'll react? Could be he'll decide to tell the world Dixon's a quack."

I shake my head slowly. "I keep changing my mind about that, but I really don't think we have to worry about Simkofsky. He's lovesick crazy, not psycho crazy. And more than a decade's passed, so hopefully, he's over it. He's got to appreciate the work Abe's done. I have a feeling it'll all work out all right."

"You have a feeling," Taz repeats, grinning.

"Yeah. What's the matter? You don't respect my feelings?"

"Oh, I respect your feelings, all right." He puts a hand on my leg. "You having a lot of . . . feelings?"

"Oh, yeah. Um, Taz, could you remove your hand while I'm driving, please? I managed not to kill us before, but I could very well cause the end of us under these circumstances."

He grins and takes his hand away.

"Thank you," I say in as dignified a manner as I can manage.

"It's straight ahead, guys," Sophie says, leaning forward from the backseat. "See it?"

A structure that looks like a haunted castle—sort of like the one in that old movie, *Edward Scissorhands*—appears.

I slow down the hovercar and gently land in front of the long, winding path leading up to the front door. (Amazing, really, how a period of extreme driving under tremendous

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pressure, i.e., being chased by a criminal, can sharpen your skills.)

We all stare.

“Wow,” I say.

“You guys ready?” Sophie asks quietly.

Taz and I look at each other, nod, and get out of the car slowly.

“Good luck,” Sophie says out the window.

“We’ll be waiting out here,” James says.

I smile gratefully at them. “You guys have been so terrific. How can we ever thank you?”

“By getting what you want so we never have to do this again,” Sophie says promptly. “Plus, a summer job with Simkofsky. Guy’s a genius. I don’t care if he *is* crazy. You know, he was the first one to autolympudate—”

“Um, Soph, we have to go . . .”

She waves her hand. “Go!”

Taz and I look at each other again, then walk up to the front door together.

“You bang the door.” Suddenly I feel a little light-headed.

“Floe, you okay?” Taz asks, concerned.

“Yeah, I’ll be fine. I just . . . can’t believe I’m here.”

“Me neither. I say we knock before we lose our nerve.”

“On the count of three. One, two . . . go!”

We knock together. There’s no bell or buzzer. Odd, considering the guy’s a scientific genius and all.

The door’s so heavy, our knock can hardly be heard.

Beyond Cool

“Guy really needs one of those knocker thingies,” I mutter.

“No need,” a man says, opening the door widely. “I heard you perfectly.”

He’s very short. Almost elflike. Decidedly less well-groomed than he was when I knew him back at Marshland. I remember him all too clearly now. A shudder goes through me. I can practically smell the lung clinic. The place where I thought I was going to die. Well, the place I *did* die.

Simkofsky’s staring at us. “It can’t be,” he whispers.

I can’t speak. I squeeze Taz’s arm, hoping he’ll know I need him to talk for me.

He squeezes back and says, “Hello, Dr. Simkofsky.”

Simkofsky whispers, “Taz Taber?”

Taz nods.

Simkofsky turns to me and says, “Floe Ryan?”

I nod.

He stares. “I worked on you. You were the first to come into the clinic, the first lymphaticotosis patients I had. You were on your deathbeds when I left—”

“Yes, we were,” Taz says, looking at him meaningfully.

His eyes widen. “So Abe and Bea managed to . . . I—I can hardly believe it . . .”

“May we come in?” I say, finally feeling able to speak without breaking down.

“Yes, certainly!”

He leads us through a dark, dusty hallway, into a dark, dusty room with a dark, dusty couch.

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Aren't doctors supposed to be all concerned with germs and stuff? This place looks like it hasn't been cleaned in years.

Then again, he is eccentric, and eccentric people don't clean—

Focus, Floe, I order myself.

Simkofsky gestures us to sit on the couch. He lowers himself into a chair opposite the couch, not taking his eyes off of us.

“Please tell me everything about your cure and your preservation.” He adds, after a moment, “If you don't mind.”

Taz and I take turns filling him in on everything. How Bea arranged a cryonics team to be present at our “deaths,” to ensure the proper procedures were followed, and how we spent ten years suspended in vats of liquid nitrogen (with Dixon's newly discovered chemicals, F9B and Z30, thrown into the mix to prevent cell damage). Then we explain how Bea Dixon developed a lymphaticosis cure at about the same time as Abe Dixon figured out how to reverse the cryonics process.

“Unbelievable,” Simkofsky murmurs. “And you were thawed ten years later?”

I nod.

He leans forward excitedly, his eyes sparkling. “What was that like for you?”

“Hard,” I say honestly.

“How so?” he urges.

I shrug. “The world has changed in so many ways. Now there are holographic teachers, hoverblades—”

Beyond Cool

"Hovercars," Taz says, grinning at me.

"And you're still teenagers, even though technically you're in your twenties," he murmurs.

"Yeah," I say. "Another thing that's totally confusing. We look and feel exactly the same way we did when we were preserved, but our real birth certificates say we're in our late twenties."

"And just to make things more complicated," Taz adds, "Floë's parents were frozen, too, and they weren't brought back until a little while later, so when she was first thawed, she had to live with her little sister, who was—is—now her big sister."

Simkofsky shakes his head. "It's unreal . . ."

"You said it," Taz says.

"But tell me, why haven't the Dixons gone public?"

Taz and I look at each other. "They were just about to."

"And so they should," Simkofsky says charitably. "Obviously the enterprise has been enormously successful."

"Well, the thing is, there's a hitch," I explain.

"A hitch?"

"Yes," Taz breaks in. "There are quite a few of us now, and for a while, it looked like we were going to be all right, but then the Dixons discovered . . . a problem."

Simkofsky leans forward and wrinkles his brow. "A problem. What sort of problem?"

Taz clears his throat and says, "We have weekly check-ups . . ."

"Naturally."

Bev Katz Rosenbaum

“And lately they’ve found—”

“What?” Simkofsky leans forward intently.

I take a breath. “There’s something funky with our immune systems.”

“We heard you were working on some experiments before you left Marshland,” Taz adds. “That you might be able to help us. You’re the best immunologist in the field.”

I look at him. “What do you say, Dr. Simkofsky? Would you like to help us?”

He leans back and, smiling sadly, says, “Of course I’d like to. But I’m afraid I can’t.”

He gets up and walks over to a window. "You know, I was . . . involved with Bea before Abe came onto the scene."

Taz and I look at each other and silently agree not to let on that we already knew this.

"So—you won't help the Dixons because of that?" I say.

"He stole her from me."

"Yes, but—"

"He had no scruples!"

"They were in love!" I say. "They ended up getting married!"

"I was in love! I would have married her!"

Quietly, I say, "Sometimes the people you want to be with don't want to be with you."

"Sometimes they change their minds," Taz says meaning-

fully, “realize they’ve made mistakes. Maybe if you’d gone back to her after a bit—”

“I *did* go back to her, begged her. She wouldn’t take me back.”

Taz and I exchange helpless looks.

“So you’re not going to help us out of spite?” I say. “Because you resent Abe and Bea?”

“No, not at all!”

“So—you’re *not* still mad at the Dixons?” Did I miss something?

He smiles at me. “Time tends to take care of these things.”

Still confused. “So . . . you’re fine with talking to them, but you still won’t help us?”

He sighs heavily. “Something in my brain seemed to snap when Bea left me. I didn’t just withdraw from the world, though I did do that. It was like my mind . . . stopped working entirely. Someone really should do a study on how emotions affect intellectual ability.” He smiles sadly.

“Well, you probably just stopped working because you didn’t *feel* like working. But like you said, time’s passed. Maybe all you need is to find something new to inspire you to go back to work. Doesn’t seeing us—real, live thawed zombies—inspire you to pick up where you left off?” While I’m saying this, I’m thinking I don’t ever want to get so wrapped up in another person that I lose my own identity. I make a vow to get too busy, once we’re back in Venice, to fall into the trap of depending on Taz for my happiness. A long time ago Dr. Dixon warned me about leaning on Taz

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too much. Now I'll only have to look at Dr. Simkofsky to be reminded of what a waste he's made of the past ten years. Even if Simkofsky can't help me, virus-wise, at least he's reinforced this valuable lesson.

The doctor smiles at Taz and me and shakes his head. "You certainly are walking miracles. Unbelievable. Simply unbelievable . . ."

"So we do inspire you! Great! All you need to do is get back in your lab—"

The doctor aims another sad smile at me. "Floe, I haven't set foot in a lab for ten years. I wouldn't even know what to do in there anymore."

Oh.

"Um, so, what have you been doing?" Taz asks.

He shrugs. "Watching television, mostly."

Uh, okay. "But you're so smart. Surely you'll be able to pick it up in no time."

He laughs. "Floe, do you have any idea how many scientific advances there have been in the past ten years? Advances I've been no part of?"

Unfortunately, I do have an idea. Suddenly I realize he'd be as lost in a modern-day lab as I was my first day back at school after being unfrozen.

"Aren't there other doctors you could team up with?" Taz asks. "Doctors who could bring you up to speed?"

He laughs shortly and comes back to the couch. "And who do you think would take on a reclusive old man who hasn't worked in a lab for ten years?"

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“But your reputation—”

“Barely means anything anymore, I assure you.”

“That’s not true. I have a friend—” Suddenly, I have an epiphany.

I rush over to the front door, open it, and gesture Sophie and James inside.

Quickly, I make the introductions and tell Dr. Simkofsky that Sophie was the one who tracked him down.

He looks at her with interest. “Really now? I meant to ask how you found me, then got distracted when I realized you two were—”

I grin. “Human Popsicles? Frozen zombies?”

He laughs. “Is that what you call yourselves?”

“Only in private.”

Simkofsky turns back to Sophie and gestures for her to sit on the couch, too. “I’m sorry, dear. We were talking about you and how you managed to find me. I’m very curious to hear. Do tell.”

And so she does. For what seems like hours. In exquisite detail.

No, make that excruciating detail.

At the end of which, Dr. Simkofsky turns to Taz and me and says excitedly, “Impressive. Clearly, your friend here is one smart young lady.”

I grin. “A smart young lady who also happens to have a special interest in immunology.” I turn to Sophie and explain the problem regarding Simkofsky being behind on developments and lab techniques. I’m hoping that when he

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realizes how much Sophie admires his work and tells him a bit about what's been happening in the field, he'll be inspired to return to the Center with us, where Abe and Bea will be able to get him up to speed on the latest laboratory developments. (They wouldn't dare refuse his help if it's offered!)

"Why don't you explain to me where you were in your experiments," Sophie suggests, "and I'll tell you a bit about what's been going on in the field." (That's my girl!)

Dr. Simkofsky's eyes light up. "Would you?"

"Of course. I'd be honored!"

"Can I persuade you to give me a little taste of what's been going on first?"

"Omigod, where do I start?" She begins to rattle off a whole list of new discoveries. I swear, the girl knows everything. It's not really fair that one person should have so much brainpower. Not when there are people like me walking around who have trouble just passing math.

Not that I'm *not* good at anything. I'm good at plenty of things. Like—

Well I can't think of anything just now.

No, I can. Like Taz said, I'm good at motivating people. That's nothing to sneeze at.

Speaking of sneezing, I let out a doozy.

Taz looks at Simkofsky and, gesturing toward me with his chin, says, "You feeling inspired yet?"

Dr. Simkofsky's eyes mist, and he nods. *Hooray!* "I've missed working."

Bev Katz Rosenbaum

“It’s finally time to move forward,” I say softly.

He nods. “It is. How can I ever thank you kids for helping me do that?”

Taz looks him straight in the eye and says, “By saving our lives.”

24

“Hello, Bea,” Simkofsky says softly at the boardroom doorway.

It’s only been a couple of hours since we first met him, but we’ve already brought him to the Center, after calling ahead first to prepare the Dixons. (We didn’t present it as a choice!) Dr. Simkofsky insisted on our giving him an hour to wash up and change. He’s made some effort to dress up, in a unisuit and matching jacket. His hair is slicked back endearingly. He looks like a little boy whose mother has made him wear fancy clothes for his aunt’s wedding.

I don’t think his goal is to woo Bea back from Abe—I’m pretty sure even he recognizes the futility of that—but he definitely wants her to be impressed by how great he looks, maybe even to look at him and wonder if she made the right

choice. (*Quel* choice: a geriatric elf or an Einstein look-alike.)

“Hello, Sam,” Bea says when we usher him in. I detect the teensiest tremor in her voice. “Thank you so much for coming to the Center. We really need your help.”

“Yes,” Abe says, standing. “We’re very grateful.” He extends a hand (*yay, Abe!*), and for a split second, it looks like Dr. Simkofsky may not take it—but then he does, and Taz and Sophie and I breathe a sigh of relief.

“It’s . . . been a long time,” Simkofsky says, looking from Abe to Bea.

“Yes,” Bea says, avoiding his eyes at first, then looking at him and adding, “Sam, I never meant to—”

He holds up a hand. “We don’t need to speak of it.”

Wow, he’s being more mature than I thought he would be! Maybe he’s finally realizing he went a little overboard, disappearing for a decade and all.

“I think we do,” Abe said in a low tone. “Best to clear the air before we get to work, don’t you think?”

Simkofsky looks at him for a second, then nods, waiting for Abe to say whatever he wants to say. He looks wary. Is Abe going to defend his own actions without apologizing? I hope not. But I don’t think so. Abe’s smarter than that. Although even at the relatively tender age of seventeen (well, twenty-seven), I realize love makes people stupid.

All Sophie, James, Taz, and I can do is watch helplessly.

“I’m sorry that we—handled ourselves badly,” Abe says.

“I never cheated on you, Sam,” Bea puts in. “Nothing of

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an intimate nature happened between Abe and me until I left you.”

Ewwww! This is *way* more information than any of us need to hear!

“But there was emotional infidelity,” Sam says quietly. “Just as gut-wrenching.”

“I stayed with you as long as I did because I really did love you,” Bea says emotionally.

“Um—do you want us to leave?” I whisper, desperately hoping someone will say yes.

“No, it’s all right, Floe,” Simkofsky says, clearing his throat and smoothing his hair back.

“We didn’t want to hurt you,” Abe says. “Bea loved you dearly, and I had the utmost respect for you, on both a professional and personal level.”

“You may not have meant to hurt me, but you did,” Simkofsky says quietly. “I don’t think you can condemn me for my reaction.”

“Of course not,” Abe says.

“But much time has passed, and I’m confident we can all move forward and work together in a civilized manner.”

Bea looks at Abe, who nods and says, “We’re extremely grateful for your generosity and dignity.”

“Yes,” Bea adds, dabbing at her eyes with a tissue.

Abe and Bea gesture for us all to sit down on chairs arranged around their desks, and when they politely ask us to recount our adventures, Sophie launches into an animated account. At the end of her tale, Sophie says I was the

real brains behind the organization, that I was determined to find Simkofsky, no matter what.

“Well, thank you for being so persistent, Floe,” Abe says. “I’m sorry for being such a stubborn old fool.”

“For a genius, you sure can be shortsighted sometimes,” I say.

He nods. “I’m also sorry I didn’t realize the anticryonists could be so dangerous.” Abe’s already arranged for the police to go and pick up Stalker Guy (Sophie gave them her tracking device, which kept a record of our exact whereabouts), and the wheels are already turning regarding a whole new security program.

“They’re not. This guy was a nutcase, and he was working alone—”

“No matter. I should have had protection in place for all of you. But things are going to be different now. In any case, this is the second time you’ve come to our rescue.”

“Let’s hope this ends as well,” I say.

“Oh, I’m sure it will,” Bea says, smiling brilliantly.

“Thank you all for contributing your various talents to the cause,” Abe adds. Turning to Sam, he says, “And thanks once again for being so kind to us, Dr. Simkofsky.”

“Please, Sam.”

“All right . . . Sam.”

Bea turns to Sophie and smiles. “Sophie, would you like to assist us with our experiments?”

Sophie looks like she wants to rush out of her seat and run over to hug Bea. “Omigod, yes! Thank you!”

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Now Bea turns to look at Sam interestedly. Uh-oh, what if she really is wondering if she made the right choice? What if she leaves Dr. Dixon and goes back to Sam?!

Nope, no chance of that, I decide when she turns back to Abe, smiles at him warmly, and takes his hand.

Whew. Thank Heaven. We don't really need the complicated love triangle thing repeating itself before the three of them have to work together to, um, save my life, which, although not immediately threatened, certainly seems to be in long-term danger. (Apparently, Lauren and David have become much worse.)

Simkofsky had better be the genius everybody thinks he is.

Again, the Drs. Dixon express their appreciation, and then it's time for them to go off with Sophie and Dr. Simkofsky. Taz and I head to the lab to give blood (hope he doesn't faint) and tiny scrapings of skin we've volunteered for the experiments. Hey, it's the least I can do, aside from contributing my wicked hoverdriving skills, to help the cause.

25

“So, that was interesting,” Taz says in the hallway. (He’s conscious—yay!)

“An understatement if I’ve ever heard one.”

“You did good,” he says, ruffling my hair. (Be still, my heart—and my loins.) “We should do something tonight to celebrate.”

“Oh, I’m pretty busy.”

He looks at me closely. “How about tomorrow night?”

“Busy again,” I say.

“What are you so busy with?”

I wave a hand. “Oh, you know, the usual. Schoolwork, hoverdriving. I’ve scheduled a retest.” The real reason I’m staying so busy and keeping Taz at arm’s length, of course, is that I’m terrified of ending up like Sam Simkofsky.

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And despite Taz's impassioned words out there in the forest, I now suspect he just got caught up in the moment. After all, we thought we were about to die. What's a death scene without a declaration of undying love? We've all seen the movies.

I have little doubt that if someone else had been there instead of me, the script would have been a little different, but the same basic thing would have happened.

Clearly, the full implication of what he said out there hasn't hit Taz yet. I expect it will soon. So I'm being preemptive. Insulating myself from his attention so when he does finally decide he made a mistake by getting back together with me, it won't hurt so much.

Ha! Who am I kidding? It'll still hurt like crazy.

But at least I won't have time to sit and mourn around the clock. Why, I'll barely even have time to brush my hair, what with all the plans I've made for the next couple of weeks!

A half hour later, even I'm feeling a bit light-headed after all the bloodletting and skin scraping. Taz and I are ordered to sit in the lounge and sip orange juice and eat cookies until we feel more like ourselves.

"You okay?" Taz asks quietly after a while.

"Yeah. You?"

"Yeah." He pauses for a few seconds. "So what's going on? You're acting weird."

"I told you, I'm fine."

"Then why did you give me the brush-off before?"

"I didn't give you the brush-off." *Yes, I did.*

"Flo, I think I know when you're telling the truth and when you're lying."

"Oh, really? You think you know me that well, huh?"

"What's that supposed to mean? Yeah, I think I know you. You're my girlfriend!"

"I *was* your girlfriend!"

"Yeah, you were, then we split up, and we just got back together."

"No, *we* didn't split up! *You* broke up with me, and then *you* decided we should get back together!"

He shrugs. "Well, yeah, I guess."

"And you don't see anything wrong with that?"

"Well, I know I shouldn't have broken up with you in the first place—"

"Oh, spare me!"

He looks at me. "Excuse me?"

Whoops. I may have gone a bit too far, as per usual.

He looks at me, incredulous. "Why would you say that?"

I throw down a cookie mid-chew. "Because maybe I'm tired of doing everything *your* way. Wondering if you'll still like me tomorrow, or if you'll withdraw, or worse, break up with me."

Fully prepared for him to get up and walk out of the lounge, I'm a bit shocked when he nods his head slowly and says, "Okay. I don't blame you for feeling that way."

Relief. "That's great. Thanks for understanding. Lord knows, I don't want to end up like Dr. Simkofsky."

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“Whoa, what does Simkofsky have to do with anything?”

He seems genuinely confused. Hmmm. Guess I didn't explain myself very well.

“Well,” I say slowly, so he'll understand the connection, “Sam got so wrapped up in Bea that he couldn't handle it when she left.”

“Some people are like that,” Taz says, watching me. “He was obviously socially maladjusted before.”

I nod. “I know, and I'm not. But I can still feel myself becoming . . . too wrapped up in you.”

“That's crazy, Floe. You're the sanest, most together girl I know. You're nothing like—”

“Taz, the way I feel when I'm with you—well, it scares me. My feelings are so . . . overwhelming.”

His eyes soften. “I feel the same way.”

I lean forward. “Do you? I don't see that. Not over the past couple of months, anyway.”

“I told you, I—”

“I'm just worried that if we get back together, I'll lose everything else in my life. You'll be my whole world.”

“I won't let that happen. I'll make sure we both have other stuff going on.”

I laugh. “Oh, yeah? You already gave me a guilt trip about being busy tonight and tomorrow night.”

“I didn't give you a—” He grins. “Well, okay, maybe I did. But I won't ever again, I promise.”

“That's nice.” I pause. “But that's not the only thing,” I say before I lose my nerve.

"This is worse than the skin scraping," Taz teases.

I ignore him and plow ahead. "I don't think you meant what you said."

"When? Just now?" he asks, confused. "I told you, I understand how you feel. You don't want our relationship to be your whole world, you want other stuff to be going on, you want to stay busy with other people, other activities. I understand. I get it. Nothing to worry about."

I look down. "Not that. I know you get that."

"Then what are you talking about?" he asks, genuinely puzzled.

I take a deep breath. "In the forest. When we thought we were goners."

"You mean . . . you don't think I meant what I said when I told you I wanted to get back with you?"

"I believe you wanted to get back with me—at the time. I . . . I think you're going to regret saying that."

He starts to say something, but I hold up a hand and say, "Please, Taz. Let me finish." I rush on so he *can't* interrupt me. "I've thought a lot about this. We thought we were going to die. I think it's probably only natural to want to feel . . . connected to someone at that moment."

"You think I told you I wanted to get back together because I thought I was going to die and wanted to feel connected to someone?" he repeats quietly. Furiously. *Uh-oh.*

"I . . . something like that," I say. *Don't get wimpy, Floe!*

"Then you don't know me very well," he says, eyes flashing.

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“I don’t know you at all! You keep running away!”

I hadn’t meant to say that running away thing. It just sorta came out.

And then he really does get up to go.

He’s at the door when I say, “See?” very quietly.

To which he says, “Floe, if I don’t walk out now, I’m going to say and do things I know I’m gonna regret. I’m doing us both a favor.”

And then, he’s gone.

26

They're working incredibly quickly. I have to believe Simkofsky doesn't sleep. In two days, he has the first set of results.

They aren't good.

"There are other things we can try, Floe," Sophie says quietly. She's come out to the Cryonics Center cafeteria, where I'm waiting.

I shake my head. "You don't understand. It'll be too late—"

"Floe, I give you my word this will work." She gets up. "And I'm gonna go back in the lab right now so we can get right back to it."

Just then, Dr. Simkofsky comes stumbling into the caf.

"Dr. Simkofsky, are you okay?" I say worriedly, jumping

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up and grabbing him by the elbow to guide him over to our table.

“I’m a failure,” he moans.

I look at Sophie in alarm.

This, we don’t need.

“Don’t know what made me think I could just jump back into things—”

“Dr. Simkofsky,” Sophie says firmly, “you know as well as I do that there’s nothing wrong with your theory. We must have set up the test incorrectly. We’ll figure out what we did wrong, and everything will be fine.”

“No,” he moans again, “failure!” He puts his head in his hands on the table.

“Maybe we should get him out of here,” I whisper to Sophie. “People are starting to stare.”

“How do you propose getting him out of here without causing more of a scene?” Sophie whispers back.

“Good point. Tired,” I say brightly to the family watching us at the next table. “He’s very tired.”

“Dr. Simkofsky, get a grip!” Sophie whispers fiercely at him.

“Sophie!” I give her the evil eye. As we’ve already established, Sophie the science genius isn’t exactly attuned to social/emotional nuances. “This is a delicate situation!”

“I don’t think he’s having a nervous breakdown, if that’s what you’re implying,” Sophie says. “The clinical symptoms—”

“I don’t give a crap about the clinical symptoms! The guy’s

in a bad way, and we have to be nice to him, not yell at him!”

She blushes. “Right. Sorry.” She pauses. “So how do we help him?”

I sigh. “Beats me.”

He moans again. “Never should have . . . come back . . .”

“Of course you should have come back,” I say absently.

“Why?” he asks. “Did I ever tell you girls about my childhood?”

Uh-oh. He’s not exactly drunk, but he sure is on some kind of bender. Maybe the fumes in the lab got to him or something.

Or maybe it’s just an emotional bender. Clearly we put too much pressure on him too quickly, and something in him snapped.

Whatever it is, now we’re stuck listening to childhood stories.

“I was a terrible student . . .”

Sophie snorts. “I don’t believe that!”

He shrugs. “It’s true. Did lousy in school. Couldn’t stand being there, wasn’t interested in anything—”

“Forget school,” I snap. Sophie looks at me with lifted brows. Okay, so even *my* patience can only extend so far. “You’re a brilliant, world-renowned scientist! Before you went into self-imposed exile”—I emphasize *self-imposed*—“you were on the cusp of a brilliant discovery, and everyone knew it! Now we really need you to complete that work!”

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“Let somebody else figure it out. Somebody smarter, younger . . .”

Sophie stares at him. “Are you kidding? You think anybody can hold a candle to you? The way your mind works is . . . astonishing! Your theories are brilliant! Did you ever consider the possibility that your university professors didn’t even *understand* the work you were doing? I mean, it must have been leaps and bounds ahead of anything they were capable of! Your experiments are works of art . . . I’ve never seen anything like them! Being able to work with you in the lab over the last few days has been an amazing experience.”

“Flattery will get you nowhere,” he mumbles, putting his head back down.

“It’s not flattery! It’s true!”

Up comes the head again. “Swear?”

“Swear!”

He grins ruefully. “That’s sweet. But the fact remains I’m of little use in the here and now. And to be around Bea, who’s with Abe . . .”

“You’re going to let *that* stop—”

“That must be hard,” I say, glaring at Sophie.

“It is,” he murmurs. “So hard.”

“I know what it’s like to lose someone,” I say.

He smiles sadly. “No, you don’t. You’re too young.”

“I’m not talking about Taz. I’m talking about my parents. When I was thawed, and they were still in vats. I missed them like crazy when I lived with my sister. My whole world had been turned upside down.”

He looks at me, then looks down. "That must have been . . . horrible."

"It was," I say quietly. "As horrible as it must have been for you to lose Bea."

"There's no comparison," he says.

I start to say something, but he holds up a hand and says, "What you went through was much, much worse."

I smile gratefully.

He sighs. "The fact still remains that I feel useless and out of touch."

Just then Bea comes into the caf. Her eyes light on us, and she comes toward us. There's another woman with her. A woman who looks astonishingly like—

"Sam, Sophie, Floe, I'd like you all to meet my sister Antonia."

Dr. Simkofsky stares. "Your sister? Yes, I recall meeting your sister briefly before she went to live . . . in the Arctic, was it? But she's not just your sister . . . she's your—"

Dr. Dixon smiles widely. "Twin. Yes."

"Hello," Antonia says demurely. "It's very nice to meet you all." She turns big blue eyes on Dr. Simkofsky. "It's a great honor to meet *you*. I've studied your work and find it inspirational. I heard you had a little setback today. But I'm sure everything will go smoothly next time."

Dr. Simkofsky draws himself up in a dignified way and smiles. "Yes, yes, of course. We can't let these little problems discourage us." Standing, he says, "I can't recall—are you a doctor like your sister?"

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“Actually, I’m an astronomer.”

“Ah, yes!” And he’s off, babbling happily about some astronomical theory he has issues with.

While the current crisis is averted, I have to say I’m a little worried about our savior.

I whisper to Sophie, “So you don’t think he’s mentally ill?”

She looks at me and rolls her eyes. “No. Just immature.”

Simkofsky clears his throat when he sees Sophie tapping her foot impatiently. “Well, Antonia, I’d love to chat all day, but I must get back to the lab. Maybe . . .” He trails off, and I try to send him a telepathic message to go for it. Which he receives. “Maybe we can get together for a coffee sometime?”

She smiles shyly. “I’d like that.”

He beams. “Splendid. You coming, Sophie?”

“Uh, yeah.”

“You girls are doing marvelously,” Antonia says, winking at us. “Keep up the good work.”

We look at Bea, who winks at us, too.

We let Antonia and Sam walk ahead of us.

Quietly, I say to Bea, “You didn’t bring her along just to play mind games with him, did you?”

“What kind of a woman do you think I am?” Grinning, she says, “After the test failure, I called her and found out she really has been half in love with him all these years.”

“Wow. Good call.”

“Literally.”

We look at each other, laugh, then head to the lab.

Luckily, the next test works. Immunity strengtheners for the newly thawed and special meds for the already affected are quickly manufactured in the Center's laboratories, and a few days later, I'm thrilled to visit the now almost fully recovered Lauren and David.

"Wow," David says. "It's like a miracle! Dr. Simkofsky is a genius, and Doc mentioned how you managed to find him. Very cool."

Lauren echoes the statement. "How can we thank you for everything you've done?"

"It was nothing," I say, waving.

"But you wouldn't turn down a gift certificate for a free virtual pizza-making game?" Lauren says teasingly.

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“No way!” I look at them. “So, you guys seem a little less . . . scared of things now.”

They exchange glances and nod. David says, “Knowing the Center can solve problems that come up is . . . comforting, I guess.” He looks at me meaningfully. “And you’ve been a huge help.”

I look at him dumbly. “I have?”

Lauren laughs. “Of course! You’ve been like an older sister to us. It was great to have you there when we were first thawed. It was so scary—everything was so new. You answered all our questions and were unbelievably patient with us.”

“Wow, thanks,” I say. Huh, how ’bout that? I had no clue my reassurances were actually helpful.

“It looks like things are gonna be okay with our aunt now, too. This illness thing really scared her, and she told us how much she loved us and everything.”

“That’s great! I’m so happy for you!” Nobody deserves happiness more than these two sweetie pies.

I’m kinda floating when I head out the Center, and so I fail to notice the person coming in through the same door. We crash. (Yeah, I know.)

When I pick myself up, prepared to apologize to the person I slammed into, I can only stare.

It’s Crimp.

“What . . . are you doing here?” I ask.

He doesn’t answer, just looks around, as if wanting to escape, and says, “What . . . are *you* doing here?”

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"I asked you first."

Still no answer.

"Are you visiting someone?"

His eyes brighten. "Yeah. I'm visiting someone."

I stare. "You're lying."

"Am not!"

"Are, too!"

He grins. "Yeah, okay, I'm lying."

"So you're a . . ."

"A Popsicle. A frozen zombie. Just like you."

"Oh, wow." How many surprises can a girl take in one day?

He grabs my elbow. "My appointment isn't for about fifteen minutes. Let's go to the caf and talk."

I let him lead me, still stunned.

We sit at a table, and he says, "Want anything?"

I shake my head numbly.

"Mind if I chow down? I'm kinda starved."

"Not at all," I say hollowly.

"Great!" He gets up and returns a couple of minutes later with a tray full of food: a veggie burger, fries, and a strawberry smoothie.

"Us frozen zombies have to keep our strength up," he says, grinning.

I don't quite know what to say to that.

"Surprised?"

"Uh, yeah. Although I probably shouldn't be. I mean, you're a Green Day fan! If that doesn't say frozen zombie, I don't know what does."

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He nods. "I thought you'd figure it out earlier."

I look at him curiously. "How come you never came to the peer groups?"

He shrugs. "Didn't want anybody besides the Dixons to know about me."

"Can you say denial?"

He smiles. "There might have been a little of that going on."

"So, you're, like, old, dude," I say teasingly. "Almost thirty."

"Hey, I'm only twenty-eight!"

I ignore him. "Jeez, you should be sipping Scotch and talking about interest rates!"

"Ha! Just shoot me if I ever want to talk about interest rates."

I grin. Filled with questions, I start with, "So where are you from?"

"Kansas. My folks moved here when I was frozen."

I nod. "That's pretty common." Something occurs to me. "So, in addition to the whole frozen-for-ten-years thing, you were a Kansas guy in California. Could explain why you were doubly obsessed with—"

"Getting everything right, knowing the hottest bands, the most happening clubs. Yeah, I was terrified of seeming uncool."

I nod. "How'd you die?" I ask softly.

"Aneurism. They figured out how to repair my brain."

"I could make a joke . . ."

“I strongly advise against it.”

Just then, Taz comes into the caf. He stops dead in his tracks. Looks at me and then at Crimp, and then at me again.

We haven’t spoken since our big blowout, but I figure I owe him an explanation. I point at Crimp, and make a shivering Motion.

He looks at Crimp again.

Crimp nods.

Slowly, Taz walks over and sits down—next to Crimp, not me. “Wow,” he says.

“That’s what I said.”

“You could have let us know.”

Crimp shrugs again. “Not my style.” Changing the subject, he says, “So you guys were the first ones thawed, right?”

We nod.

Looking at us, he says, “So what’s goin’ on?”

“Whaddya mean?”

“Whaddya mean, whaddya mean? What’s goin’ on between you two? You’re barely looking at each other.”

Who would have ever guessed Crimp would be playing the role of relationship counselor to me and Taz?

“You know what, Crimp, this is really none of your—”

“None of my business? Is that what you were going to say, Taz-man? Well, guess what, it *is* my business. I’m friends with both of you, and I wanna see my friends happy. And seeing as we’re all frozen zombies, we should look out for each other, dontcha think?”

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“Sounds reasonable,” Taz says, “except we didn’t know you were a frozen zombie until, like, a minute ago.”

Crimp pops some fries in his mouth. “Well, now you know. So, are you two gonna get back together or what?”

“We’re fine. Don’t worry about us,” Taz says stiffly.

“Yeah, right, that’s why you’re still not looking at each other.”

“We just had a little argument, that’s all,” I say.

“Now who’s in denial?” Crimp says.

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At school, Crimp starts being unbelievably nice to me on a full-time basis.

As a result, a funny thing happens. Taz and Crimp's other friends start being nice to me, too! Samara, for one, who actually tells me out of the blue one day that she owes me an apology for having treated me so badly.

"Only if you mean it," I say.

"Well, here's the thing." She takes a breath. "I really like Crimp. I wanted him to think we liked the same things and people and disliked the same things and people. So whenever he pulled stuff with you—called you kid or whatever—I followed his lead. Now he's being nice to you, so I'm being nice to you. Not that you don't deserve niceness. You do. You're a good kid."

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I've barely registered anything since "Crimp." Don't even care that she called me a kid. I stare. "Crimp?"

"Yeah, Crimp. I like Crimp. Why?"

"Not Taz?"

She sighs. "No, not Taz. I'm sorry about that. I was just using Taz to make Crimp jealous."

I cross my arms. "Really."

"Yeah. It was totally scummy of me, I know. I don't blame you for being mad. And I really am sorry if I caused any trouble between you. I'd hate it if someone did that with Crimp."

Well, at least she's being honest. I sigh. "You didn't cause any problems between us. We had—have—lots of our own problems that have nothing to do with you."

"But you guys are so cute together!"

"*Were. We were* so cute together." I slam my locker shut.

"If you can't make it, nobody can," she says mournfully. "There's no hope for me and Crimp. And I think he likes you, anyway."

I turn to her and smile. "You're wrong about that. He totally doesn't like me in that way."

"Really?" Samara looks happy and hopeful again.

"Really. If I were you, I would give him a few more hints again."

"I did a lot more than give him hints," she says darkly.

"Do it all again. He had some . . . stuff to deal with when he first got here. He's been distracted. Trust me, it'll register this time around."

She looks doubtful. "You think?"

"I know."

"Okay, it's worth a try, I guess." She gives me a quick hug before taking off.

I join James and Sophie in the cafeteria. James is so happy with Sophie, he's totally lost his fascination with goth culture, and is wearing *khakis*! He's also letting his green dye job grow out. (He's a natural redhead! With freckles! Who knew?) He's still friendly with the goths, but for the most part, he and Sophie are their own little island these days.

"Hey, Floe," he says brightly. "I'm going to get some fries. Want anything?"

"No thanks," I say politely.

He shrugs and walks away after giving Soph a quick peck on the cheek.

"Soph," I say, looking after him, "do you ever think maybe you're spending too much time with James?"

"No, not really," she says, taking a bite of a cucumber roll. "Why?"

"Don't you ever think about . . . I don't know, what happened to Dr. Simkofsky happening to you?"

"Winning a Nobel Prize, you mean? Sure, I think about it all the time! It's my dream."

"That's not what I meant."

She laughs and winks at me. (It seems love has softened my genius friend.) "I know. But just so we're clear, exactly what are you talking about?"

"Well . . . aren't you worried about losing yourself because you're so wrapped up in another person?"

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She shrugs. “No, not really. I still make time for my friends and my hobbies.” This is true. We went shopping just last night. My bff has developed a new and consuming interest in fashion. “I’m not as lonely and insecure as he is—was,” she corrects herself. “I think he was one of those guys who was always alone—before Bea. It was just him and his work. There was never any balance. Not even any friends. When Bea left, he couldn’t cope with the loneliness.”

Wow, looks like being in a relationship has taken care of the one void in Sophie’s knowledge database.

Hmmm, I think. I’m not exactly lonely or insecure, either. I have a lot of friends (well, I do now, anyway), and I keep myself busy with extracurricular activities. (Now that I’m more confident about my hoverdriving skills, I don’t feel like I have to practice every waking minute—I was totally lying to Taz—so I actually have time for other things, like writing and sketching.)

So am I worrying for nothing? Should I make more room for Taz in my life?

There’s still the matter of his having said what he did in the forest. Did he mean it or not?

I’m coming to suspect he *did* mean it . . . and that with my outburst, I was just punishing him for past actions.

Maybe we’ve both grown up this year.

James comes back, and we start to gab about school stuff. Mostly, we speculate about the music project marks we’re about to get in pop culture, after lunch.

As you might have guessed, my group’s mark is not good.

At a table with my project partners, I just about faint dead away when Stevie turns to me and says, “Floe, you were sooo right. We *totally* should have listened to you. Doing our project on K-Fed—how stupid was that?”

“Yeah,” Cal says, swiping a lock of hair out of his eyes. “How dumb are we? We’ll do whatever you say next time. You’ll be our partner again, right? It was *great* working with you.”

“Yeah, you’re gonna hafta work with us on *every* project,” Stevie says. “Hey, wanna use my new all-in-one today?” she asks eagerly. “All the bells and whistles.”

“Uh, no, thanks.”

“I saw Crimp using one just like it this morning!”

Ah! That’s it! These guys *idolize* Crimp and Samara and the rest of the senior year gang. And now that Crimp and Samara are being nicer to me, so are they!

I should despise Stevie and Cal for their sheeplike behavior, but I don’t. Which isn’t to say I’m about to become all palsy-walsy with them. No friggin’ way. I don’t make buddies with sheep.

But maybe they deserve the benefit of the doubt.

After all, people make mistakes.

Like not trusting their boyfriends.

That was a biggie.

And I don’t quite know how I’m gonna fix it.

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I do have one more hoverdriving class scheduled before my retest. Don't want to get too cocky.

Even Masterson is impressed with my new abilities and bends over backward praising himself for turning his most hopeless student into an ace driver.

Too bad I can't tell him how I *really* learned. Nothing like a little pressure to make sure a job gets done, is my new motto.

Despite my masterful driving the day we found Simkofsky, I'm still extremely nervous on the day of my rescheduled hoverdriving test.

I'm even more nervous when I see the old, mean lady at the registration desk.

I can only pray she doesn't remember me.

But of course, she gives me the evil eye as soon as I step up to her desk.

"Hi," I say perkily. "I was here once before—"

"I remember," she says ominously.

I decide to ignore that. "And I didn't do too well—"

"Next time, make sure everything is in order," she snaps. "When there's a scheduling problem, it makes you more nervous."

I clear my throat to keep from saying something I'll regret. "Yes, well, in any case, I'm back, and I'm ready to try again."

Then Cam comes out from behind a door. He stops dead in his tracks when he sees me.

"You," he whispers.

Sheesh, he could at least try to hide his horror.

I paste a bright smile on my face. "Yeah. Here to try again."

"Are . . . you sure?"

Way to build up my confidence, Cam. "Yes," I grate out.

"It really hasn't been that long. Don't you think you might need a few more les—"

"No!" I snap.

He holds up a hand. "Okay, okay." He takes the paper I hand him and looks it over carefully, as if hoping to find some kind of technical boo-boo that would disallow me from retaking the test.

No such luck. After a few minutes, he sighs and says, "Come with me."

"Same car!" I force myself to say perkily when he points at it.

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“Just had it fixed,” he says grimly.

“There’ll be no need to fix it this time,” I say more confidently than I feel. These guys *really* have to work on their attitude. I’m sure it’s a self-fulfilling prophecy: If Cam makes a student think she’s going to do badly, she *will* do badly.

Course, there are students who will do badly no matter what.

I may have been that kind of student last time, but I’m definitely not that kind of student this time. Since that last test, I’ve kicked some serious bad guy butt! Really gave Stalker Guy something to worry about . . . before crashing.

Don’t think about that, I order myself.

“Course is pretty crowded today,” Cam mutters as we climb in. He buckles himself in . . . tightly.

Wonderful.

“Do you want to reschedule?” Cam asks hopefully.

“No!” I say quickly.

Best to get it over with.

Isn’t it?

“Fine,” he says dully. “Engage the motor.”

I do.

“Accelerate,” he orders me.

I do.

So far, so good. Working as a getaway driver has definitely improved my skills.

Too bad you didn’t get away, a little voice says.

Shut up, I tell it.

“Liftoff,” Cam commands.

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I achieve it easily.

“Good,” Cam says.

Good! He said good!

I quickly sober. He wasn't kidding. There are about a million hovercars in the air.

“Change lanes,” Cam commands.

Easier said than done. I still have trouble making out those thin laser beam lane markers.

Turns out it's a good thing there are so many cars on the course. Makes it much easier to determine lanes.

Too bad there's no opening.

Make an opening, I tell myself.

Aggressive drivers have no problem doing this.

What are you, a wimp? I ask myself. *No! You. Are. Not.*

A. *Wimp. You saved the Cryonics Center twice! Now go!*

My whole body tenses as I signal, make eye contact with a driver coming up to me in the next lane, and move in.

It works.

But I make the mistake of relaxing a bit too much and nearly get hit by a car coming up swiftly behind me in my new lane.

Alert once again, I say calmly, “What now?”

“Make a left up there.”

Uh-oh. The rules about who goes when at a four-way stop (which describes *every* airborne intersection, as there are no traffic lights in the air) seem to have completely flown out of my head.

I do my darndest to try to catch the attention of the other

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driver waiting to turn at another corner of the intersection when I get there.

And hallelujah, she waves me through.

“It wasn’t your turn to go,” Cam admonishes me.

“I know that,” I say innocently, “but she waved me through.”

He gives me a sideways glance, not sure whether he can trust me to tell the truth. He can’t, but he doesn’t know that.

“What would you like me to do now?” I say sweetly, wanting to show him I’m game for more and wanting to change the subject, stop him from thinking about the turn. Although, who knows, worse things could be in store for me.

“Obstacle course, up ahead.”

Uh-oh. Not everybody gets the obstacle course, only, like, one in ten people.

The obstacles are holograms.

Which are even harder to make out in the bright sunlight than those laser beam lane markers.

Cam orders me to turn off the road into an airborne parking lot type thing, marked up with laser beams and sprinkled with about two dozen holographic figures.

Great. Double trouble.

“Drive around the figures,” he says, “then, at the end of the first lane, turn and go up the next lane, driving around the figures in that lane, and so on, until you reach the end of the course.”

“Easy-peasy,” I say, suddenly feeling nauseated. Maybe I

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don't even need my hoverdriving license. Maybe I can just get my friends to drive me around everywhere. Forever and ever.

And turn into my helpless parents? I shudder. No way. I'm going to get my hoverdriving license, and not just because the 'rents need me to chauffeur them around everywhere (Sunny and Andrew, with their work, classes, and child, are decidedly less flexible than *moi*), but because I need to show them that frozen zombies can kick butt in the modern world.

I take a deep breath and start inching up the lane.

"You can go faster," Cam growls.

Gritting my teeth, I get up to the speed limit.

And nearly knock over the first hologram.

"You have to slow down when you approach one!"

"Right. I can do it," I say, not believing it.

But I do it. Not once, not twice, not three—but two dozen times!

"Now what?" I say giddily at the end of the course.

"Turn left onto the road we were on before and just drive," Cam says. He's wiping his forehead with a tissue. Okay, he's sweating, but he hasn't ordered me to drive back to the center yet. I'm taking that as a good sign.

To my complete and utter surprise, I find myself relaxing while driving. And—shock of shocks—enjoying the drive! Driving in the air is actually pretty wondrous. Once you learn how to do it properly.

The first time I hoverbladed, I felt like I was flying. And I guess it really is more like flying than hoverdriving is—it's

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just your body flying through the air. But you can only go so far. Then you have to touch down and take off again.

In a hovercar, you can fly as long as you want. And hovercars are fairly light, so it's not like being in a big jet plane where you don't feel like you're flying at all. In a hovercar you feel every motion, every dip, every crest. It's so much fun (now that I can do it), I'd feel incredibly guilty about it if the hovercars weren't completely nonpolluting.

Cam points. "Hoverpark up there."

I follow his finger with my eyes to two expensive-looking hovercars with barely enough space for mine between them.

It's déjà vu all over again.

"Um, do you think there's enough room?"

"I wouldn't have asked you to do it if I didn't think so," he says. His eyes are slanted now. He's remembering what a truly terrible driver I am.

But I'm not.

Or so I tell myself.

I pull up alongside the first hovercar, move up a little, put the hovercar into reverse, and do the five lever pulls I'd failed to do last time, then angle in . . .

Yessss! I do it perfectly.

"Okay, we're done," Cam says tiredly. (I don't even take his words or tone personally. Hafta say, I'd never want to be a hoverdriving teacher.) "Let's go back."

I drive back, my heart thudding in my chest.

Which nearly explodes when Cam informs me I've passed my hoverdriving test.

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That same night, there's a big party at the Cryonics Center and, understandably, I'm totally in the mood.

Even if Taz, looking awesome in a blue unitard (weirdly, we're both in 'tards tonight) and I are still carefully avoiding each other.

“Congrats, girl!”

“You're da bomb!”

“Mega kudos!”

The compliments are flying fast and furious.

Taz is on the other side of the room. Deep in conversation with Melanie, a gorgeous former Popsicle and musician.

Just Taz's type.

Or, she would be, if he was single.

Is he single?

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I have no idea. We haven't spoken since that last awkward conversation with Crimp in the Cryonics Center cafeteria.

The C-man isn't here tonight, natch—this shindig isn't nearly A-list enough for him. Sophie and James, on the other hand, are here, though they might as well not be. They've been off in a corner by themselves since they got here. (More PDA, despite all my strongly worded lectures.)

Before I can bite the bullet and go over to him, my mom comes over to me, and I say, "Hey, isn't this nice? Aren't you glad I dragged you out of the house?"

My mom clears her throat. "Yes, I've been meaning to talk to you about that."

"About what?" I ask, confused.

"My—fear of going out and trying new things."

Oh, that.

"You don't have to say anything, Mom. I totally get it. Being thawed is rough. There are so many new things to get used to, it can be overwhelming—"

"But I had a responsibility to *not* let it overwhelm me. I had *you* to think of," my mom says softly. "And I let my fears get in the way of that responsibility. I'd like to say I'm sorry."

Wow! If you haven't had the opportunity of hearing a parent apologize to you about something, I highly recommend the experience.

I wave a hand, like it's nothing. "No apologies necessary. Just out of curiosity, what brought this on?"

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“You,” my mom says softly.

“Me?”

My mom nods vigorously. “What you did—finding Simkofsky—was amazing.” She frowns. “Foolhardy and risky”—now she’s smiling—“but amazing. Made me feel ashamed that I’d kept myself holed up at home.”

Wow. I don’t even know what to say.

My sister, Sunny, walks up to us, carrying a tired Jake in her arms.

“Hey, you,” I say softly, chucking him under the chin. (He’s definitely cuter when he’s sleepy.)

He gives me a sort of smile, then he rests his head on Sunny’s shoulder and shuts his eyes. I look up and catch Taz’s eye (he’s on the other side of the room), but we both turn away.

“So,” Sunny says. “You guys see the spread over there? The Dixons went all out.”

“Oh, I have to take a look, see what they’re putting on buffet tables these days,” my mom says, winking at me.

We watch her go, then Sunny looks at me. “You okay?”

“Sure I’m okay. Why shouldn’t I be okay? I got my hoverdriving license today!”

“Yeah, so you’ve told me about a hundred times.”

“And I’m gonna tell you a hundred more times, till you say congrats.”

She grins. “Congrats. Really. That’s great.”

“Because you won’t have to chauffeur me around anymore?”

She winks. “You guessed it.” She gestures to Taz with her chin. “What’s up?”

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I fiddle with a tassel on my gold unitard. “Whaddya mean?”

“You know what I mean. Why have you two divvied up the grounds?”

“We haven’t—” I sigh. “Okay, I guess we have.”

“Trouble in paradise?”

“Oh, it’s far from paradise.”

“Relationships aren’t always a bed of roses,” Sunny says.

I look at her. When I first lived with her and Andrew, it sure wasn’t paradise all the time, though, in retrospect, it wasn’t so bad. There was always a bond between them that couldn’t be broken, a bond that’s grown stronger over the past year, while they’ve worked together toward a common goal (making my parents’ art gallery a success). “Where’s Andrew, by the way?”

“Night school,” she says. “I skipped. No way I was gonna miss this. One of us needed to go, though. He really wanted to be here.”

“I know. And thanks, Sis.” I flash her a grateful smile. “Hey, shouldn’t you guys be finishing up soon?”

“Next week’s our last class. Thank God.”

“Then you’ll have your business degrees?”

“Yup,” she says, smiling. “Bet you didn’t think we could do it.”

“What are you talking about? I always thought you guys could do it.” *No, I didn’t.*

“You’re *such* a liar,” she says, smiling. “And a wiley one. You’ve totally gotten us off the topic of Taz.”

I sigh. “There’s really nothing to say.”

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"Then you guys have to have a talk, don't you think?"

"We *have* talked."

"Obviously you've argued. Not the same thing."

I look at her. "Never thought I'd be asking you for relationship advice, but you and Andrew seem to communicate pretty well. What's the secret?"

She smiles ruefully. "Aw, honey, there is no secret. Well, no, scratch that. Love is the secret. If you love each other enough, you stay with each other through all the rough stuff. You have to expect bumps along the way and just know that you're gonna come out the other side."

I look at Taz. "What if one person loves more than the other?" I say softly. "That's dangerous, isn't it?"

She follows my gaze. "I don't think there's any lack of love between you. Especially on his part."

"How do you know?" I ask curiously.

"Jeez, Floe, he went on that whole wild-goose chase with you!"

"It wasn't a wild-goose—"

"I know that now. But it sure seemed like one. If Taz had told me he was gonna go with you, I would have tried to talk him out of it."

"You would have?"

She smiles. "Nah. Not this year. Maybe last year."

"I guess it did seem pretty crazy . . ."

"Uh, yeah."

"So," I say, studying Taz (who's still deep in conversation

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with Melanie), “I guess coming with me was a kind of show of faith.”

“More than that. A declaration of love,” Sunny says.

“I think we have to talk.”

“Atta girl.”

“I’m scared,” I admit.

She grins. “You? Scared? Surely you jest! You’re the chick who saved the Venice Beach Cryonics Center—twice!”

I grin back. “Yeah, I did, didn’t I?”

“Yeah, ya did.”

We talk a bit more, then she heads over to the buffet area with her sleepy bundle of joy, toward Mom.

I jump when none other than Dr. Samuel Simkofsky taps me on the shoulder.

“Hey, Dr. Simkofsky, how ya doin’? Some night, huh?”

“It sure is,” he says. He looks completely and utterly happy. “The culmination of all my work,” he says, satisfied. He clears his throat. “I just wanted to thank you. I’ve already spoken to Sophie—and James and Taz. But without you, none of this would have happened.”

I start to say it’s nothing, but he puts up a hand. “No, I mean it. You searching me out is one of the best things that’s happened to me. I’ve reconnected with my work, and more importantly, with the people in my life who matter.”

I’m not sure what to say. “I’m just glad everything worked out. You saved us all. We owe you a lot, and I’m really happy you don’t regret coming to the Center.”

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Antonia sneaks up behind Simkofsky and snakes an arm around his waist. "Sam, drink?"

"Oh, I don't think so, dear. I don't want to forget anything!"

"It's a wonderful night," Antonia murmurs, snuggling up to him.

"Yes it is," he says back, staring into her eyes.

I clear my throat.

Startled, they look at me. Antonia straightens and says brightly, "Oh, hello, Floe. Enjoying the party?"

"Always love a party."

"Well, as I was saying, this is a very special one. Antonia, I was just thanking Floe for doing so much for the Center"—he looks at me meaningfully—"and for me."

"I'll second that," Antonia says. "Bea told me about everything you've done this year and last. After what you've been through, well, it's pretty amazing."

"Thanks," I say, thoroughly embarrassed by now.

"Antonia, why don't you head over to the buffet. I'll join you in a minute."

"All right, sweetheart." She actually winks at him before heading off.

"I couldn't help but notice a little tension between you and Taz," Simkofsky says once she's gone. (Jeez, is everybody gonna give me relationship advice tonight?) He leans toward me. "I say dump him."

"What?" I stare at him in surprise.

He winks at me. "Kidding. Go fix the problem. You two

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belong together. Plus, he's been staring at you all night. Clear evidence of attraction."

"I hope you're right," I say. "You really think—"

But just then, Abe says loudly from a podium, "May I have your attention, please?" and Sam whispers, "Gotta go—showtime!"

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When everyone's quiet, Abe says, "First off, Bea and I would like to extend our most sincere thanks to Dr. Samuel Simkofsky, who went far beyond the call of duty in order to help us and was unfailingly kind and generous in our time of need." Boisterous applause and whistles for Dr. Simkofsky.

When the noise dies down, Abe continues. "And once again we find ourselves thanking Floe Ryan for helping us during our recent time of trouble." Everyone turns to me and claps appreciatively. "Floe got her hoverdriving license today, so let's give her an extra round of applause!" More applause. I hafta say, it feels good. "We also owe a huge debt of gratitude to Floe's good friend, Sophie Bernstein and her, um, associate, James Denton, and another Cryonics Center client, Taz Taber."

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He looks at me.

I look at him.

Then we quickly look away.

“We could all learn a valuable lesson from these young people, who, when faced with an obstacle, never thought of doing anything but taking action, making things right.” Abe pauses. “We will be holding a press conference tomorrow,” he says, and everyone goes completely silent. “The world will know that we’ve successfully thawed some of those who were cryonically preserved. We won’t name names, but some people may suspect you”—he points at a client—“or maybe you”—he points at another one—“have been ‘thawed.’ Bea and I and the rest of our staff have tried to prepare you all for the outcome. Things certainly won’t be easy, but the time has come. And I firmly believe we all can handle it.”

Now I don’t catch Taz’s eye; I catch David’s eye. He’s standing not too far from me, with Lauren. He winks at me, and Lauren smiles bravely. I smile back and give them a thumbs-up.

They’re going public, I think, kinda stunned. *They’re really doing it.*

It hits me suddenly. I *have* to talk to Taz—have to make things right between us. I won’t be able to go through this without him!

Dixon hands the podium over to the Center’s temporary public relations director (Emma’s fill-in), who explains what’s going to happen, press-wise, and when she winds up her speech, I march over to Taz and Melanie.

“Hi,” I say bluntly, giving Mel the evil eye.

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“Hi,” she says, looking at me, then at Taz, then at me again. “Hey, congrats on the license, and thanks for finding Simkofsky—”

“Sure, no prob. Listen, Taz—”

“Floee!” Taz seems shocked at my rude behavior.

“Right. Sorry, Mel. Listen, I just really need to talk to Taz . . .”

“Oh, um, okay.” She looks at me like she thinks I’m insane. (I’m totally used to those looks.) “No prob. See ya, Taz.” I’m surprised she doesn’t give him the universal sign for *She’s cuckoo* as she leaves.

“Nice,” he comments.

“I had to talk to you.”

“You did? I thought you didn’t need me for anything,” he says stiffly.

“I never said that,” I say weakly.

“No? Sounded a lot like that to me.”

I sigh. “Taz. I’ve been thinking. I’m not crazy like Simkofsky—”

He cracks a small smile. “Could have fooled me. Witness that stunt you just pulled with Melanie.”

“What were you talking to her about, anyway?” I ask curiously.

“Music programs in southern California,” he says, looking me in the eye and crossing his arms.

“Oh,” I say weakly. So he wasn’t flirting. He . . . really is looking into staying in California to study music, just like he said in the woods!

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I silently tell my heart it's too early to be flying up into my chest like that.

"Oh," I say, as calmly as I can. "Find out anything interesting?"

"Yeah, a lot," he says. "But maybe we'll talk about that later."

I decide to ignore the maybe. "As I was saying, I'm not crazy like Simkofsky"—I rush ahead so he can't interrupt me again—"and so I don't think there's any chance of . . . losing myself in a relationship."

He doesn't crack a joke this time. "It's a real concern. I get that. I shouldn't have gotten so—"

I hold up a hand. "No, let me finish. And I *do* believe you meant what you said in the forest."

"You do?" he says. "Cuz with all my back-and-forth, it's no wonder you didn't know whether to trust me or not. I've been doing a lot of thinking about that. And even if you did believe me, your first instinct was probably to protect yourself so you wouldn't have to go on another roller-coaster ride with me—"

Wow—has he actually forgiven me for thinking the worst of him? Dare I even hope . . . ? "Hey," I say lightly, "not a problem. You know us girls love the strong, silent types."

"Well, you shouldn't. I'm gonna work on my communications skills."

Wow, he *is* serious! Does this mean . . . ? Can't tell quite yet . . . hafta continue playing it cool until he gives me a clearer message . . .

“Like I said, I’ve been doing a lot of thinking. I was pretty devastated when you said you didn’t believe me.”

Oh, God, could I feel more terrible? “I’m really sorry, Taz. I didn’t mean to make you—”

He grins. “Yeah, you did.”

Hmmm, he’s kinda right. “Okay, maybe I did.”

“And you had every right to. How *could* you believe me after everything I put you through?”

I consider that. “Well, yeah, that’s probably where my head was. But I think, deep down, I knew you were probably having as hard a time apart as I was. What we had together was so special . . .” I look at him.

“You bet,” he murmurs, snaking an arm around my shoulder. He leans in closer. “Every minute away from you was pure torture.”

“You sound like an old movie.” Okay, I think I can start to hope now.

“I’m an old guy.”

“Twenty-eight . . .”

“Old enough to know how to prevent problems between us in the future—”

“We have a future?” I whisper.

“If you want to have one,” he says seriously.

My smile is taking up my whole face. “I want one.”

He’s close enough to kiss me. “That’s good. That’s really good. I repeat, I intend to work on my communications skills.”

“Speaking of communication, tell me more about your

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conversation with Melanie.” I want that kiss, but I’m too curious.

He breaks away. Crap. (I’m coming to think PDA isn’t such a bad thing.) “She confirmed everything I’ve been thinking. L.A.’s the world capital of the music scene, right? Why would I want to leave southern Cal? That’d be pretty stupid when all the people to meet are here. And UCLA has a fabulous program. Melanie did it and loved it. Said she got great training and met great people.”

“Sounds perfect.” Okay, I’m letting my heart soar now!

“It *is* perfect,” he says. “Though nothing’s perfect,” he adds seriously. “I can’t expect it to be. I’m sure there’ll be times I’ll think I made the wrong choice, but it’s all about sticking it out—”

Uh-oh. Was that a metaphor for his relationship with me? I’m not sure I like the sound of that.

“Taz, you’re not ‘sticking’ with me out of some sense that it’s bad to be indecisive, are you? Cuz it’s perfectly fine to be indecisive if you’re feeling, well, indecisive. I don’t want you to be with me because you feel you have to ‘stick it out,’ I want you to be with me because, well, you want to be with me—”

“I *totally* want to be with you, Floe Ryan.” He puts his hands on my shoulders and looks deeply into my eyes. “I’m committed to repairing our relationship and taking it to new heights.”

I can’t help but grin, even though I’m dying for him to kiss me. “You sound like you’re in therapy.”

“Speaking of therapy”—he drops his arms and gestures

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with his chin toward the Dixons—"we might need some soon. You ready for this whole going-public thing?"

I grin and move closer to him. "I am now."

He grins back, then pulls me to his chest.

"My mom is watching," I whisper, not pulling back. He feels soooooo good.

"I don't care," he whispers back. Between words, he kisses my neck. (PDA totally rules!) "Don't . . . you . . . dare . . . break . . . up . . . with . . . me," he says.

"Wouldn't . . . think of it . . ."

And I truly don't think I ever will.

THE VBCC NEWS, ISSUE #25

"ASK FLOE"

By Floe Ryan, V.B.C.C. Peer Reintegration Counselor

Hey, guys, this is my first column since the Dixons went public, so aside from all the usual questions, we have some that specifically pertain to the fact that our secret is out. A big shout-out to all of you for handling this biggie so well! And kudos to you for asking questions. Seek and ye shall find, right? Seeing as this is an extra-special column, it's extra-special long, too . . . enjoy!

I don't get it. What is the point of smashball?

Um, you get to smash things legally? I know. I don't understand, either.

My younger brother is now my older brother. Does this mean I can't beat him up anymore?

Yes!

Why does virtual food taste so good?

Cuz you don't make it yourself!

Why do cliques still exist?

Sadly, cliques will always exist.

Why is hoverdriving so hard?

You know, before hoverdriving, we thought land driving was hard. Okay, forget what I just said. Hoverdriving *is* really hard. But don't give up. It took me ages to master it—you're not alone!

My acne's gone, thanks to the cryopreservation chemicals, but I'm still self-conscious and have no confidence!

Now you know that what your mother said about confidence coming from within is true! Time to work on that!

Whatever happened to Dakota Fanning?

How should I know? Check IMDb!

I used to want to be a teacher. Now they're all holograms so I hafta choose another career—but I can't think of anything!

Why not do what most teens do and just take a wide assortment of interesting university courses for a couple of years? Maybe you'll

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discover something that will float your boat. If all else fails, there's always Starbucks. (LOL!)

Help—I hate unitards! What do I do?

The same thing you did when you hated a trend in the old days—don't follow it! Wear vintage, or start a trend of your own! Good luck!

My parents seem so tired all the time. What is it about modern-day life that's so exhausting?

It's no more exhausting than it used to be, dude. Your parents are *old!*

Why don't I ever see celebs in southern California anymore?

Because most of the new film stars are computer-generated!

I wanted to be a film actress, but most of them are computer-generated now.

Why not be a stage actress? Equally satisfying, if you don't mind earning about a zillionth of what you would have as a film star in the olden days.

Can you tell me what happened on the final episode of *The Young and the Restless*?

Victor married Nikki. Again.

Is silver the new black?

You're already behind! Aqua is the new silver!

My new friends never saw *The O.C.* What do I talk to them about?!

Any of the new nighttime soaps, like *Venice Beach*, about a gang of confused frozen zombies!

Why haven't any new planets been discovered?

Not sure. I don't do science.

What happened on the final episode of *SpongeBob*?

He woke up as a McDonald's burger flipper. The whole Bikini Bottom, pineapple-under-the-sea thing was a dream.

What happened on the last episode of—

Who *are* you people? Get a life! Read! Go outside!

What's a good career to enter now?

Professional gossip! Publications, TV shows, and websites are all totally consumed with trying to figure out who has and hasn't been frozen! Kidding, obv. If you're good in science, how about engineering? The hovercar market is exploding—and of course, biotechnology is huge.

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Has dating etiquette changed much in the last few years?

Not really. Clean up. Be on your best behavior. Try not to burp.

My boyfriend found out I'm a thawed zombie, and he's freaked out. (I think it's the age thing.) Any advice?

Give him time and space. Remind him you were *preserved*. That means you have, for all intents and purposes, remained the same age you were before. (Just don't remind him you're a Black Eyed Peas fan. LOL!)

My mom is still saying I can't get my tongue pierced—but I'm twenty-five, not fifteen!

Well, your birth certificate may say you're twenty-five (and hooray for no longer having to get fake IDs anymore, like we did before the Dixons went public!) but because you were preserved, you're still a fifteen-year-old, physically and emotionally. But hey, that's a good thing, right? Forever young and all that jazz!

Help! My whole family was thawed at the same time, and we're all completely stupid about modern-day stuff. Any suggestions?

Yeah! Come to the weekly peer group meetings! Don't, and risk being left out in the cold (ha-ha)!

I think people are trying to figure out if I'm a thawed zombie or not—I hear them whispering behind my back. What do I do?

The same thing you do when people whisper behind your back about other things—ignore them. (If these are your friends, look for a new set.)

A couple of my thawed zombie friends went to the tabloids after the Dixons went public and got big bucks for their stories. Is this right?

It was right for *them*, I guess. Presumably, they know they'll be hounded by press and public alike for months, possibly years . . .

I think Dr. Simkofsky's medicine is working *too* well. I haven't had so much as a cold since taking it. Should I be worried?

Are you crazy? No!

I hafta say, I'm a little disappointed in the future. It's not nearly as, well, futuristic as I expected. Some stuff is different, but so much is the same.

So much about human life will never change (see earlier question about cliques), but you have to admit, holographic teachers, hovercars, and virtual reality games are all pretty cool! Methinks you need to take up a thoroughly modern hobby like hoverracing to get you into the spirit of Now!

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Just wanted to write in and say all those people who complain about being brought back are crazy! I think it's great being a frozen zombie—the ultimate adventure!

That's the spirit! But some people lack that thrill gene and, understandably, have a harder time adjusting.

Whatever happened to Lindsay Lohan?

This one I *can* tell you! She got married, had four kids, got her master's degree in education, and opened up an exclusive private school in Hollywood. Yeah, I know.

How come nobody knits anymore?

Beats me. Why don't you try to bring back the trend?!

Why aren't there any storms anymore?

Cuz we did such a great job reversing the greenhouse gas effect—yay, us!

I feel like riding a plain old bicycle. Where can I get one? And would people think I was weird if I rode it?

Have you tried antique stores or flea markets? You might have some luck there. (I found a fabu 2007-era skateboard at one!) Yeah, you'll probably get a few looks when you're riding it. But who cares?

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Why are people still reading books?

Books rule—always have, always will!

Will the normals gang up on the Popsicles when they figure out who's who?

Some probably will. Bullies will be bullies. But, like Anne Frank, I still believe that most people are good at heart, and you should, too.