

Beyond Cool

By Bev Katz Rosenbaum

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“SO, how have you been feeling?” Dr. Dixon asks at my checkup after school. He’s your typical mad scientist/doctor type, complete with crazy, sticking-out white hair. He and his wife Bea, the female version of him, 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 scientific progress and they can’t invent a tongue depressor that doesn’t hurt.

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

He finishes looking in my ear and then moves back to the counter. “Well, it could be a reaction to stress. I imagine that despite your prep here, you’re finding school difficult. It’s happening to a lot of cryo-preserved people. Or...”

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

“Yeah?”

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

Oh.

Oh-oh.

“Well, colds are pretty harmless, right?”

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

Oh.

“Still, it’s not like we’re all getting cancer, or dying, or anything,” I say brightly.

“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 gossip sites would be tons worse than having it released via a press conference at the Center. Can you imagine the crazy articles the sites would run? Then, for sure, I’d be treated like a freak. Even at Venice Alternative School, where, lemme tell you, it’s some accomplishment being tagged as a freak, what with all the eccentrics packing the joint.

Course, the sites will go crazy even after a Cryonics Center press conference, but at least at least the correct information will be out there.

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 girl who organized the massive fundraising campaign to save this place, who also happens to be the best peer counselor in the world, be having any problems?”

Hmmm, how, indeed?

I actually can't run my peer counseling group today. The two most recently 'thawed' teens, sweet fourteen-year-old twins Lauren and David, are, according to Dr. Dixon, both under the weather. They 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 blotchy red rash on her arms, and David's elbows are hugely swollen.

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

"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 have to get better, so I have somewhere to go after school on Wednesdays."

She attempts a smile. "Dixon said...weak immune systems."

Her words hit me like a thunderbolt. Dixon hadn't worded the problem that way when I talked to him. 'Weak immune systems' 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 that cloned sheep a few decades back?

"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 kind of scary.

I move over to David's bed.

"Hey," I say.

"Hey," he says tiredly.

“How are you feeling?” I ask.

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

“What’s that all about?”

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

Omigod, my heart just about bursts when he says that. Lauren and David are 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 technology like I did. 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. Some peer counselor, huh? But David’s soon sleeping, so I head back to Dixon’s office to get the scoop.

The door’s slightly ajar and I stop mid-knock. Bea and Abe seem to be having a fairly intense conversation.

“Even if we did know where he is,” Bea is saying, “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 is the person whose heart we broke and then he disappeared off the face of the earth...”

Um, say what?

“Abe, Sidney Sims isn’t the only immune system specialist I worked with at Marshland—“

Were she and Sidney an item when she worked at Marshland, the clinic where I died? I was sent there when I contracted lymphosis because its lung specialist, Bea, was the best. Bea

talked my parents into cryo-preserving me and moved my body to the Cryonics Center when I passed...

“No, but he was the best. Apparently, he was just about done with the experiments on some breakthrough treatments for weak immune systems when we got together and he took off. No one since has had much success with immune strengtheners.” He sighs. “Well, no point talking about Sidney Sims.”

“So let me get this straight,” I say, opening the door and walking in. They both jump up about a mile up in their chairs. “You have a bunch of thawed frozen zombies--“

“Floe, you are *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?”

“First of all, there isn’t only one guy,” Abe says. “There are a number of immunology specialists working here at the center--”

“But he’s the best,” I say, crossing my arms. “You said it yourself.”

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

“I don’t see anybody announcing any breakthrough treatments for weak immune systems. Lauren and David could sure use some of those.”

“Floe, we’ve tried to find him. He doesn’t want to be found. Even his closest family members don’t know where he went all those years ago. He took off without telling anyone anything.”

“What if the anti-cryonicists get ahold of this?” I ask after a second. There are always anti-cryonics protesters outside the Center. They still don’t realize Abe has successfully ‘thawed’ a whole bunch of people. When they find out there are a bunch of us frozen zombies roaming the earth, and that we have damaged immune systems...

“Floe, I promise we’re going to solve this problem...”

I make a promise, too--to myself. I promise myself *I’m* going to find Dr. Sidney Sims.

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I decide I'm going to enlist my genius new best friend Sophie's help. (I'm still tight with Haley and Ashleigh from Cactus Hill, where I lived with my sister before my parents were thawed, but now I'm back in Venice Beach and don't get to see them that much.)

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

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--or any--of her zillions of questions.

I do have the perfect opportunity. Popular girl Samara's party on Sunday night--Halloween. I decide to dress like a zombie, in torn clothing, with lots of white makeup and fake blood, and black rings around my eyes, but I add plastic icicles. Frozen zombie, get it? I figure the costume will help Soph believe me when I tell her about my, er, interesting background.

"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. Sunny and Marissa were neighbors in Cactus Hill, but both moved to Venice around the same time. Sunny re-located when our parents were thawed so she and Andrew could help them adjust to their new life and revive their art gallery. Suburban life in Cactus Hill was Sunny's brief rebellion. Turns out she missed Venice as much as I did! Marissa came 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-cryopreserved sister can still pass for a teen. “You don’t think you’re taking a bit of a risk?”

“Nah. Nobody knows anything.”

“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 loves running the gallery and is a much happier person, so she no longer has to torment me. That is, revel in her new power as an older sister. Which is what she did big-time when I lived with her in Cactus Hill.

“Nope. I’m going with Sophie.”

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

Our newly thawed parents 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 hippy artist types. But now, the level of their distractedness is ridiculous. My dad has very impressively managed to avoid dealing with any of it, having gone out on the road to purchase inventory for the gallery. Back in the old days, he and Mom painted and sold all their own stuff, but they haven’t produced much since the big thaw. Though Mom spends her days pretending to paint...

“Want to do a virtual pizza-making thing?” Sunny asks.

Sooo cool. You can be a chef in a virtual game, 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.”

“Okay. I’ll just have to get Andrew to do it with me.”

“You guys hanging around here tonight?” Sunny, Andrew and Jake live at the new Venice house with us, but they’re hoping to save up enough money for their own place in a year or so.

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.

“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 thing 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.”

Poor Mom. I remember how that felt, though I picked things up a lot faster than she did.

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. Come here, mom.”

We all go into the virtual reality room (a.k.a the den) 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 non-electric 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 pretty much the same as ordering a pizza. Somebody monitoring your game replicates what you made and delivers your order.”

“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 Palermo’s famous Los Angeles-based Italian restaurant. I have no idea how VR games work, how you can really feel like you’re somewhere else when you’re not. I asked Sophie once, but the result was a long-winded, science terminology-filled explanation I couldn’t follow.

“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.

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

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

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

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

“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 don’t feel comfortable talking to a hologram!”

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

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 sprinkle 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 at the wheel, that is. Hoverdriving is my nemesis this year, like hoverblading was last year.

At the door, Sunny says, “Floe, why don’t you 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, you mean.”

“Ha-ha. Go phone Sophie. I’m going 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.”

OMIGOD, almost all the girls are dressed in pinup type costumes. How could I have been so stupid as to make myself look hideous?

“Hey, Floe,” Samara says, slinking up to us. Sigh. Naturally, she’s wearing the skimpiest of all the costumes. She looks at Sophie.

“This is my friend Sophie,” I say.

“Hey, Soph. What’s up?” she says half-heartedly.

To which Sophie starts babbling on about everything she’s learned in the past week or so.

She does this numerous other times over the course of the evening. When I’ve finally had enough, I tell Samara, “Think I’ll find Sophie and head home.”

“But it’s so early,” she protests without a note of sadness.

“She has a curfew,” I lie.

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 leaning against the kitchen door. He looks 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 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 go with 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. I look her straight back in the eye and say,
“Sophie, I was a teenage popsicle.”

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SEATED on the computer chair in her stark white room-slash-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. Sims. Of whom she's totally aware, naturally. Apparently, immunology is one of her many passions. 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 bed. "Sophie, I'm still a person. I'm not a monster." I hope it's true--hope 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 chemicals?"

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 Sims, 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 she babbles on in technology lingo, ending with, "Ooh, how fun is this gonna be?"

A ton 'o fun, obviously.

WHILE Soph is yukking it up at her computer, I'm going to be learning how to hoverdrive. So I won't have to depend on Sunny to drive me places.

"Ryan, concentrate!" barks out Sargent—I mean Mister--Masterson, my holographic hoverdriving teacher, ten minutes into class the next night. They're programming holograms with, um, distinctive personalities these days.

His warning comes too late. I lose control and hover-crash to the ground. Not that I wouldn't have crashed even if I'd been paying attention. Hoverdriving is *really* hard. 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.

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 all start whining about their backs. Crybabies. I hate group lessons.

"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 apologize when he puts cream in my coffee instead of milk.

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,” he snarls finally.

“Well, teachers are supposed to teach, right? Isn’t a teacher’s proudest moment not when a gifted student gets something, but when a student who’s 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 lanes is a deadly dull combination.

I’m almost looking forward to the in-car lesson by the time it rolls around.

“Zon, you take the wheel first,” Masterson growls.

Not only does Zon, an annoyingly cocky semi-pro 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 white lightning streak running down one side. 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.

“My back!” Zon groans. “I have to stay healthy for smashball. I can’t be getting whiplash!”

“Me neither!” Tron echoes.

Masterson glares at me. “Care to try that again, Ryan?”

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 the hovercar full of students in front of me.

“My back,” Zon whines again. Wow, 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 already 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 going to 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 going to give me some attention.

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

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 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.”

“Long story,” I tell him.

Ten years long...

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“SO, what have you got?” I’m at Soph’s the next day after school.

“Well, I’ve already scoped out some basics. I have his social security number--“

“Wow! How’d you manage that?”

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

“Wow, you mean you hacked into them?”

“Well, yeah, but—“

“Sophie,” I interrupt her, “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. A noise that slightly-hard-of-hearing Sophie wouldn’t have heard.

“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 running away. Victor the super nerd who's crushing on me at VBA? He looks taller. And Victor doesn't seem like the running type.

Was somebody actually prowling around in here? Trying to listen to us? If so, why? Who would be following me? An anti-cryonicist who suspects Dixon's been 'thawing' us? Nah. They're politically strident, not criminals. They wouldn't resort to breaking and entering. Besides, the guy I saw didn't look familiar. I'd recognize any of the regular Cryonics Center protesters.

"You're probably just being paranoid. Does the hacking stuff spook you? No worries--I totally know what I'm doing. No way we'll get caught."

I tell myself to calm down. "So what next?" 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 the hacking talk has fed my natural paranoia.

Sophie continues on excitedly about what she can do to find Sims' latest address, and when she's done, she turns to me and says, "You're going to stay, right? We can order up a virtual pizza for dinner."

"Wish I could," I say. I'm already at her bedroom door. "Hoverdriving lesson," I add, sighing.

INVENTORY time:

- a) I'm unpopular. (Evidence: I have one friend.)
- b) I'm a slow learner. (Evidence: I suck at hoverdriving. Last night was a nightmare.)

- c) I'm stupid. (Evidence: I'm doing lousy in school and need Sophie's help to find Sims.)
- d) I'm a terrible peer counselor. (Evidence: I have no idea how to talk to or help Lauren and David.)

I decide spending quality time with family members 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, Jake-y?" 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 attitude?

"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.

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, 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. (She could care less about hers. But I'm as worried for her and Dad as I am for myself...)

After dinner with Mom on Saturday night, I let her in on my plan to find Sims, thinking it will put her mind at ease. I don't tell her I'm planning to contact him in person. Nor do I tell her I have the crazy feeling I'm being shadowed, though by whom, I have no idea. I remain convinced Victor isn't up for anything beyond staring.

Telling her has the exact opposite effect I intended. "Honey," she says, "if the Dixons thought he could help, I'm sure they would have contacted him. And there are other immunologists working on the problem. This Dr. Sims 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.

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

"Mmm."

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

I sigh inwardly. What's really a bummer about being a thawed 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, anti-cryonicists, 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 you.

"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 easier going in the days before--well, you know."

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

I feel a little twinge of sadness for the loss of our carefree lives.

"It's so hard to watch your child cope with all these medical problems on top of everything..."

I give her a hug. "Mom, there's nothing to worry about. We'll find Sims, 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. But she's way off. I'm so not in denial.

Am I?

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AFTER school a couple days later, I decide a virtual hoverdriving lesson at home is in order before heading over to Sophie's house. Can't hurt, right?

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

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

"Medium," I say.

"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?"

"A lesson, please."

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

"Blue." Like my mood. After her great start, Sophie has hit several brick walls in her search for Sims.

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

Ha, right. Cute like those little movie monsters that look like sweet babies till 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. Hmm. Clearly Roboto doesn’t think someone at a medium level needs to be reminded how to accelerate.

“Please accelerate your vehicle, Floe Ryan,” Roboto says 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. “It’s just that I, um, forgot how to accelerate.”

There is a long pause, and then Roboto says, “You forgot 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.

Um, hello, 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.” Wow, Roboto definitely sounds ticked off. I can’t believe it!

Now, as if to punish me, Roboto launches into an excruciatingly detailed explanation of what all the gears do. When I realize he’s practically shouting at me to accelerate, I also realize I must have nodded off. 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.”

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.

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 angrily.

"No kidding," 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.

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. (Wow, does he have to be so dramatic? It's a freaking virtual game.)

Lowering the car to the ground is considerably easier said than done.

"Um, how do I lower the freaking 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 frigging car?" I scream.

Roboto lectures me about foul language again, even though I've been using squeaky clean versions of swear words. Then he 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 freaking time," I mumble, exhausted.

"Floe 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.”

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“DID you hear that?”

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

“Hey, watch the tone, Bernstein!”

Sophie sighs and runs a hand through her hair. “I’ve run into so many roadblocks with the search. I’m sorry if I’m being a rhymes-with-witch.”

“No prob. 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.

Who is it? The anti-cryonics protesters who hang outside the Center don’t even verbally harass us. They totally would if they knew we were frozen zombies. They just think we have relatives in suspension. They’re all 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 in person anymore. It’s so easy to track somebody electronically.”

“Well, sure, but somebody who’s tracking you might ultimately want to *find* you to *do* something to you, right? A stalker, for instance, *wants to get close to you*.”

Sophie seems a tad thrown by this. Now we’re talking about human interaction, and that 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.

Suddenly, there’s a bright red spot on the map Sophie has up on her screen.

She leans in.

So do I.

Neither of us speak for a moment.

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

UNFORTUNATELY, I can’t celebrate for long because I have a hoverdriving lesson.

Hooray, right?

“Hello, Sophie,” Sargent—whoops, Mister--Masterson says. “I still think you should take a break from hoverdriving lessons.”

“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 very soon.”

He gives a little snort 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 is basically gibberish to me.

None of this does a whole lot for my confidence level, which is down 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, 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.

My turn. Solo. Masterson doesn't let anyone else into the car with me.

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.

Focus, Ryan, I tell myself. I do an old breathing exercise that helps me tune out everything and everybody else. I focus only on my own self, my own mind.

"Is she meditating?" 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, I can't miss this time. Or so I tell myself.

I get the motor started, accelerate, achieve lift off—and weave all over the place and crash to the ground.

IT'S just Mom and me at home for dinner. Sophie and Andrew have taken Jake to Mickey D's. Which is still going strong, course. Mom's made a good old-fashioned vegetarian lasagna and California salad. She's finally mastered the 'newfangled' oven.

"Honey, are you still trying to find that doctor?" she asks when we're done.

I lean forward. "We've found him, Mom."

Her eyes widen. "Really? Oh, I don't think you should go see him, 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.”

“Well, if somebody, namely me, doesn’t find Sims, 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 my hoverdriving lesson talking. “I’m glad you did.” *As long as the immune system thing is cured and I don’t drop dead in six years.*

She studies me. “I’m not sure I’m glad I did it,” she says quietly.

“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.”

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"I'M not sure I love the idea of going by myself," I tell Sophie.

"You don't want to ask the doctors to go with you?" she asks.

"Definitely not."

"I know he associates the Dixons with a bad time in his life, but there are doctors at the center, right?"

"Yeah, but Sims will associate them with the Dixons." She's not getting the hint. Or maybe she is. She's a big fan of Sims, but she far prefers electronic interaction over the human kind.

"*I could* use someone to tag along for moral support." I decide not to mention the driving thing. There's still a chance I could get my license, right? Hahaha.

"You're associated with Abe and Bea, too."

"Yeah, but I've been preserved and thawed. He's got to be fascinated by that. And the fact that I'm a kid can only work in my favor. How can he say no to helping an innocent kid who was signed up for cryonics by her parents?"

"Okay," Sophie says, sighing. "I'll come with."

I grin, relieved. "Great."

"When are we leaving?"

"Sometime the day after tomorrow. After I get my hoverdriving license." How's that for optimism?

"You'll do great."

“From your lips to god’s ears,” I say.

BUT on the hoverdriving test course, I can barely manage to start the motor.

Then I can barely manage to accelerate.

Cam, my tester, 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!”

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?*

If I had a passing lesson, whatever I learned has gone clear out of my mind.

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. My suspicions are confirmed when he 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.

I even start enjoying myself.

Always a bad sign.

“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.

Again, I can’t recall much.

That is, 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!* That's crazy!" Even I hear the somewhat frantic note in my voice.

"If you don't 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.

"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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ABOUT twenty minutes later, worn down, I'm seated in Sophie's purple hovercar. Have I mentioned that Sophie's parents are insanely wealthy? The perks are totally wasted on Sophie, who's practically a shut-in.

We head into a wooded area I've never ventured into before. After a minute, Sophie slows down and swerves to avoid a clump of trees. It's extra-hard to hoverdrive in wooded areas because 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," she says while swerving, "have you considered the fact that this guy might have gone totally off his rocker?"

"Nice time to mention that," I say.

"I was so proud of myself for finding him, I didn't even think about it!"

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 Sophie is keeping me company as well as driving.

Well, maybe I'm not so happy she's driving. Just then, her hovercar hits a large tree limb. And then, before I know it, we're falling. Luckily, we land on a grassy patch.

After a second, Sophie turns to me and says, "You okay?"

"Sure. Peachy."

"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.

"The car's probably still okay. Lemme see if I can achieve liftoff."

I look back at her to see her staring in horror at her arm and going white.

Her bleeding arm.

And the next thing I know, she's telling me she thinks *I* have to hoverdrive the rest of the way to Sims' place.

"No," I say, shaking my head. "Don't be ridiculous. I take a closer look at her arm. "It's just a scratch--it's not broken or anything." I know because I took an emergency first aid course way back when I was a competitive blader back in the day.

She smiles wanly and shuts her eyes. With a sinking heart, I remember she can't stand the sight of blood. Which has ruled out brain surgeon as a career choice.

Uh-oh, she looks like she 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 bag and quickly covering her scratch with it. "If I drive, we'll die."

"No...*I* drive, we die," she murmurs. "Floe, failing test...means nothing..."

I shake her a little bit. "Hey, Soph, stay awake."

"No," she mutters. "Sleep now."

"No, don't sleep!" I say.

Holy crap, she actually fainted because of a scratch!

Sighing, I get out of the car, go over to the driver's side, open the door and shove her 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 at Sophie's house.

What do you know, I *wasn't* imagining my stalker.

And now he's about to confront me in a deserted forest, where I'm stuck with a semi-conscious friend and a possibly incapacitated hovercar.

No way I'm going to save the day this time. This ain't no Disney movie.

"Turn over!" I mutter to the engine. And to my infinite relief, 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.

Huh. It really is a magic word. The hovercar starts to go.

And then it stops.

Because I've just run into a rock.

We're doomed.

I try again.

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 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 (haha) just yet.

He's right on my tail.

Soph cracks open an eye. "Turbo..."

Yay! She's coming to! "Yes! Turbo! How did I forget about turbo? You're a genius!"

We were told about the hovercar's turbo capacity in hoverdriving class, but were also warned never to use it. (Begging the question, why do these cars even *have* turbo capacity?)

I press turbo and we pitch into the air.

"Woohoo!" I yell.

My excitement is short-lived.

Because, of course, Stalker Guy's hovercar is at turbo capacity, too.

"Tricked it out with...super turbo," Soph mutters.

"What?" I yell frantically. "What's that? Soph—don't faint again! What did you say?

You tricked out your hovercar? It has some kind of super turbo capacity?" Course she did!

Another career option of Soph's is rocket scientist!

“Yeah.” She chuckles. “Not...legal...”

“Soph, do *not* fall back asleep! How do I get it to super turbo?”

“Hold turbo...ten seconds...”

“Hold down the turbo button for ten seconds?” I’m doubtful that’s going to work, but I do it anyway.

But it does! 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 going to outrace a criminal with their cool, tricked out car. Oooh, illegal super-turbo!

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...

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LUCKILY, we land in a bush.

“Holy crap,” Soph says, instantly wide awake.

Stalker Guy has landed, too (much more elegantly than us) and has come out of his car.

“Who’s he?” Soph asks.

“Stalker Guy.” I glare a little at her because she thought I was imagining the noises in her house.

Stalker Guy’s opening the hovercar door, grabbing us, throwing us down roughly at the base of a tree, and tying our wrists to it. I yell, “Hey, easy on her, she’s hurt!” Well, it’s just a scratch, but hey, I’ll take any advantage...

No answer.

“What do you want with us?”

“Oh, I think you know, Floe,” Stalker Guy says, smiling creepily. “I need to slow you down, keep you from visiting the good doctor.”

Wha...?

The anti-cryonics activists are politically strident, not *violent*!

“Are you working alone?” Soph says, reading my mind.

Stalker Guy smiles, sending chills up my spine. “The others would never go as far as we need to go.” Ah. So he’s not one of the sign-carrying protesters. He’s more the hide-in-the-bushes type. “They’re not really down with my plan for him. Thanks for helping me locate him, by the way. We definitely don’t need another brainiac trying to figure out how to thaw dead

people. He worked with the Bea Dixon way back and I'm guessing they're trying to get him to work at the Cryonics Center. Why'd they send a kid? I know you volunteer or something there. I see you there all the time."

I shiver a bit. He's been watching me, following me. Which I already knew but now I *really* know.

But at least he doesn't seem to know Dixon's already figured out how to thaw people and that I'm a former popsicle.

"So exactly how far are you willing to go here?" Soph asks. "You've already assaulted us. Are you going to kill us?"

Hello, what?

He shrugs. "The end justifies the means, don't you think?"

"No, I don't!" I snap.

"Me neither," Soph says. "Listen, I don't know--"

Stalker Guy cuts her off, saying, "I'm sorry, I'm going to have to take temporary leave of you. Don't try any funny stuff."

Wow, I can't believe he actually said, "Don't try any funny stuff."

Soph and I watch him take off in his hovercar.

"Do you think he's going to hurt us?" I ask.

"Nah," she says. "I doubt he wants to be pinned with a double murder rap."

I decide to pretend I didn't just hear the words "double murder rap".

"Sorry I was such a wuss about the cut," Soph says. "And for not believing someone was spying on us. You did a great job of driving, by the way."

“I did?” I smile wanly. “Yeah, I did. Lot of good it did us. And no worries about the blood thing.”

“Thanks.” Pause. “You definitely should have gotten your license.”

“Thanks. That means a lot to me.”

She looks down at the ropes binding us. “So twentieth century. How much of a technophobe is this guy? First following us in person, now *ropes*. ”

Before I know it, she’s done some kind of complicated maneuver to get loose, then unties me.

“Impressive! But Stalker Guy might be back before we get away,” I say nervously.

“Oh, he’s already back,” a voice says. He steps out from behind a tree and points a gun at us. “And he’s not very happy.”

Uh-oh. This is *not* good.

“Hey, I know you don’t want any serious trouble,” I say, holding up a hand. “Why don’t you just let us go? We promise we won’t say anything about your little stunt.”

“Do you honestly believe I can let you go? Or that I ever intended to let you go?”

I gulp. “C’mon, listen, you’re just an anti-cryonics 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. “I’ve been in trouble all my life. I couldn’t care less.”

Neither of us have anything to say to that.

He moves threateningly toward us, and when he makes like he’s about to pull the trigger, Soph grabs something out of her jacket pocket and throws it in his direction. Suddenly, there’s an explosive sound, and the air around Stalker Guy gets foggy.

I start to run, but Sophie says, “No need.”

When the air clears a second later, we see Stalker Guy slumped on the ground, his eyes closed.

I stare. “What...how...?”

“Hey, I’m a scientific genius, right? Don’t worry. He isn’t dead. But he won’t be bothering anybody for a while.” She grabs something out of another pocket and clips it to him. “Tracking device,” she explains. “For the cops. Now let’s get out of here. To the hovercar!”

When we’re there, Sophie turns to me and says, “Why don’t you drive?”

Maybe it’s all the adrenaline rushing through my system, but I actually want to.

“You know what? I think I will.”

She grins and nods. “Take it away.”

“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.

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“NERVOUS?” asks Soph, beside me in the front passenger seat. We’re minutes away from Sims’ place.

“After what we’ve just been through? Nah.” I smile at her. “Well, okay, a little.”

“It’s straight ahead.” Sophie leans forward from the backseat. “See it?”

A structure that looks like a haunted castle 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 pressure can sharpen your skills.

We both stare.

“Wow,” I say.

“You ready?” Sophie asks quietly. “I’ll stay here.”

Guess it was too much to hope she’d actually come to the door with me. I nod and slowly get out of the car.

“Good luck,” Sophie says out the window.

I smile gratefully at her. “You’ve been so terrific. How can I ever thank you?”

“By getting what you want so we never have to do this again,” Sophie says. “Plus, a summer job with Sims. Guy’s a genius. I don’t care if he *is* crazy. You know, he was the first one to--”

“Okay, I’m going now!”

I knock. There's no bell or buzzer. Odd, considering the guy's a scientific genius and all.

The door's so heavy, my knock can hardly be heard.

"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 short. And decidedly less well-groomed than he was when I knew him back at Marshland. I remember him now. A shudder goes through me. I can practically smell the lung clinic. The place I thought I was going to die in. Well, the place I did die in.

He's staring at me. "It can't be," he whispers.

I can't speak for a second. "Hello, Dr. Sims," I say finally.

"Floe Ryan?"

I nod.

He stares. "I worked on you. You were the first to come into the clinic, the first lymphosis patient I had. You were on your deathbed when I left—"

"Yes, I was," I say, looking at him meaningfully.

His eyes widen. "So Abe and Bea managed to... I-I can't believe it..."

"May I come in?"

"Yes, certainly!"

He leads me through a dark, dusty hallway, into a dark, dusty room with a dark, dusty couch.

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.

Sims tells me to sit on the couch. He lowers himself into a chair opposite the couch, not taking his eyes off me. “Please tell me everything about your cure and your preservation,” he says after a moment. “If you don’t mind.”

I tell him everything. How Bea arranged a cryonics team to be present at my ‘death’ to ensure the proper procedures were followed. And how I spent ten years suspended in a vat of liquid nitrogen with some new chemicals thrown into the mix to prevent cell damage. Then I explain how Bea developed a lymposis cure at about the same time Abe figured out how to reverse the cryonics process.

“Unbelievable,” Sims murmurs. “And then you were thawed?”

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, hovercars...”

“And you’re still a teenager, even though technically you’re in your twenties,” he murmurs.

“Yeah,” I say. “Another thing that’s totally confusing. I look and feel exactly the same way I did when I was preserved, but my birth certificate says I’m in my late twenties. And just to make things more complicated, my parents were frozen too, and they weren’t brought back until a little while later. So when I was first thawed, I had to live with my little sister, who was—is—now my big sister.”

Sims shakes his head. "Wow. And there are others?"

"Quite a few, yes."

"It's unbelievable..."

"You said it."

"But tell me, why haven't the Dixons gone public?"

"They were just about to--"

"And so they should," he says charitably. "Obviously the enterprise has been enormously successful."

"Well, the thing is, there's a hitch," I say.

"A hitch?"

"Yes. 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."

Sims leans forward and wrinkles his brow. "A problem. What sort of problem?"

I clear my throat and say, "We have weekly checkups..."

"Naturally."

"And lately they've found—"

"What?" Sims leans forward intently.

I take a breath. "There's something funky with our immune systems. I heard you were working on some experiments before you left Marshland. That you might be able to help us. You're the best immunologist in the field."

Smiling sadly, he says, "Of course I'd like to. But I'm very sorry. I'm afraid I can't."

-11-

HE gets up and walks over to a window. “You know, I was...involved with Bea before Abe came onto the scene.”

I force myself not to say I already knew this.

“So—you won’t help the Dixons because of that?” I say. “Because you resent Abe and Bea?”

“No, not at all!”

“So—you’re *not* still mad at the Dixons?” I’m definitely missing something here.

He smiles at me. “Time tends to take care of these things.”

Still confused. “So...why won’t you help us?”

He sighs heavily. “Something in my brain snapped when Bea left me. I didn’t just withdraw from the world, though I did do that. It was like my mind...stopped working. Someone really should do a study on how emotions affect intellectual ability.” He smiles sadly.

“Well, you might be overthinking. You probably just stopped working because you didn’t *feel* like working,” I say. “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 me—a real, live thawed zombie—inspire you to pick up where you left off?”

The doctor smiles at me and shakes his head. “You certainly are a walking miracle. Unbelievable...”

“So I 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?"

He shrugs. "Watching television, mostly."

Huh. 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. He'd be as lost in a modern lab as I was my first day back at school after being thawed.

Then something comes to me. "Excuse me for a minute, doc!"

I run outside and explain everything to Sophie, and, miracle of miracles, she agrees to come in.

Once she's inside, I quickly make the introductions, and tell Dr. Sims that Sophie was the one who tracked him down.

He looks at her with interest. "Really now?" He turns back to me. "I meant to ask how you found me, then got distracted when I realized you were—"

I grin. "A human popsicle? A frozen zombie?"

He laughs. "Is that what you call yourself?"

"Only in private."

Sims 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. Sims turns to me and says, "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."

(Among all her other special interests.) I turn to Sophie and explain the problem regarding Sims being behind on developments and lab techniques.

"I'm happy to help!" she exclaims.

Dr. Sims's eyes light up. "Would you?"

"Of course--I'd be honored!"

"So...what's going on in the field?"

"Oh my gosh, where do I start?" She rattles off a whole list of new discoveries. It's not really fair that one person should have so much brain power. 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. I'm good at motivating people. Like Sophie. That's nothing to sneeze at.

Speaking of sneezing, I let out a doozie.

Sophie looks at Sims and, gesturing toward me with her chin, says, "You feeling inspired yet?"

Dr. Sims's eyes mist and he nods. Hooray! "I've missed working. How can I ever thank you kids for helping me find the way back?"

I look him straight in the eye and say, "By saving my life."

-12-

“HELLO, Bea,” Sims 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. Sims insisted on our giving him an hour to wash up and change. He’s made some effort to dress up, in a unisuit. His hair’s slicked back endearingly. He looks like a little boy whose mother has made him wear fancy clothes for his aunt’s wedding. He definitely wants Bea to be impressed by how great he looks, maybe even look at him and wonder if she made the right choice.

Does high school never end?

“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 and for a split second, it looks like Dr. Sims may not take it, but then he does, and Sophie and I breathe a sigh of relief.

“It’s...been a long time,” Sims 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?”

Sims 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 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 an intimate nature happened between Abe and I until I left you.”

Ew, this is *way* more information than any of us need to hear.

“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,” Sims 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 says, “We’re extremely grateful for your generosity and dignity.”

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, she says I was the real impetus behind the search, that I was determined to find Sims 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 short-sighted sometimes,” I say.

He nods. “I’m also sorry I didn’t realize the anti-cryonicists could be so dangerous. We’re definitely going to redo our security.”

“Well, 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.

“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, Sam.”

Bea turns to Sophie and smiles. “Sophie, would you like to assist us with our experiments?”

Sophie looks like she wants to hug Bea. “Omigosh, yes! Thank you!”

The four of them go off together and I head to the lab to give blood and tiny scrapings of skin for the cause...

-13-

THEY work unbelievably quickly. In two days, Sims 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've been waiting.

I shake my head. "You don't understand. It'll be too late for some people--"

"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. Sims comes stumbling into the caf.

"Dr. Sims, are you okay?" I say worriedly, jumping up and grabbing him by the elbows 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. Sims," Sophie says firmly, "you know as well as I do that there's nothing wrong with your theory. We'll figure out what we did wrong, and everything will be fine."

"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! Being able to work with you in the lab over the last two days has been an amazing experience."

“And to be around Bea, who’s with Abe...”

“You’re going to let *that* stop you?” Sophie practically rolls her eyes.

“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. “When I was thawed and lived with my sister and my parents were still in vats , I missed them like crazy.”

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 worse.” He sighs. “The fact still remains, 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. Sims stares. “Your sister? Yes, I recall you mentioning a sister who was living...in the Arctic, at the time, was it? But she’s not just your sister... She’s your—“

Dr. Dixon smiles widely. “Twin. Yes.”

“Hello,” Antonia says. “It’s very nice to meet you all.” She turns big blue eyes on Dr. Sims. “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. Sims 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?”

“Actually, I’m an astronomer.”

“Oh, how wonderful!” And he’s off, babbling happily about some astronomical theory.

He clears his throat when he sees Sophie tapping her foot impatiently. “Well, Antonia, I’d love to chat more, 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.”

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 those 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. Sims is a genius. He 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.

“No way!”

“And you’ve been a huge help in other ways, too,” says David.

I look at him. “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 about that? I had no clue I’d actually been 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 practically fly out of there.

And then remember I have to *really* do some flying...

-14-

I 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 backwards praising himself for turning his most hopeless student into an ace driver.

Too bad I can't tell him how I *really* learned.

Despite my masterful driving the day we found Sims, I'm still extremely nervous on the day of my test.

I get even more nervous when Cam comes out from behind a door, stops dead in his tracks when he sees me, and whispers, "You."

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 lessons—"

"No!" I snap.

He holds up a hand. "Okay, okay." He studies the bookings on his all-in-one 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.

"Just had it fixed," he says grimly.

“There’ll be no need to fix it this time,” I say with more confidence than I feel. These guys *really* have to work on their attitude. I’m sure it’s a self-fulfilling prophecy: if Cam makes students think they’ll do badly, they *will* do badly.

“Course is pretty crowded today,” Cam mutters as we climb in. He buckles himself in tightly. “Sure you don’t want to reschedule?” he 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.

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 today.

“Change lanes,” Cam commands.

Easier said than done. I still have trouble making out those thin laser beam lane markers.

Maybe 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 most certainly 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! Yay!

“What now?” I ask Cam.

“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 best to try and catch the attention of the other 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 a dozen holographic figures.

Great. Double trouble.

“Drive around the figures,” he says. “And 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 don’t 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 my parents 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 a 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 take that as a good sign.

To my complete and utter surprise, I find myself relaxing while driving. And—shocker!—enjoying it! 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. Hoverblading is 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...

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 say, gulping.

“I wouldn’t have asked you to do it if I didn’t think so,” he says.

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. “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.

-15-

THAT same night, there's a big party at the cryonics center, and obviously, I'm totally in the mood.

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. "And I let my fears get in the way of that responsibility. 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?"

"You," my mom says softly.

"Me?"

My mom nods vigorously. "What you did—finding Sims—was amazing." She frowns. "Foolhardy and risky, but amazing. It 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 chuck him under the chin.

He gives me a sort of smile. Then he rests his head on Sunny's shoulder and shuts his eyes.

"You guys see the spread over there?" says Sunny. "The Dixons went all out."

"Oh, I have to take a look, see what they're putting on buffet tables these days." Mom winks 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 going to 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."

"Where's Andrew, by the way?"

"Night school," she says. "I skipped. No way I was going to 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 goodness."

"Then you'll have your business degrees?"

"Yup." She smiles. "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.

We talk a bit more, then she heads over to the buffet area with her sleepy bundle of joy.

I jump when none other than Dr. Sims taps me on the shoulder.

“Hey, Dr. Sims, how you doing? Some night, huh?”

“It sure is,” he says. He looks completely and utterly happy. “The culmination of all my work,” he says. He clears his throat. “I just wanted to thank you. I’ve already spoken to Sophie. 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 was one of the best things that’s ever 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.”

Antonia sneaks up behind Sims 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 centre. And for me.” He looks at me meaningfully.

"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, embarrassed.

"Oh, Abe's at the podium. Speech time."

Dr. Dixon motions for everyone to quiet down, then says, "First off, Bea and I would like to extend our most sincere thanks to Dr. Samuel Sims, 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. Sims.

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 have to say, it feels good.

"We also owe a huge debt of gratitude to Floe's good friend, Sophie Bernstein. 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 to make things right." He pauses. "We will be holding a press conference tomorrow." At this, 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. "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."

I catch Lauren's eye and she smiles bravely. I smile back and give her and David a thumbs up.

They're going public, I think, kind of stunned. They're really doing it.

My adventure is really just beginning...

THE END